The Handmaid's Tale

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MARGARET ATWOOD

Atwood is the second of three children. Her father was an entomologist (insect researcher), and she grew up playing in the Canadian woods. A writer since childhood, she received a bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto and a Master's at Radcliffe College, the former women's college affiliated with Harvard. Atwood studied Victorian novels, which she has said influenced her belief that novels should be about society as a whole, not just about the characters' specific lives. She has taught writing and English at many universities in Canada and the US, and has published dozens of books of poetry, fiction and nonfiction. Critics tend to acclaim her books, and she's won major prizes. *The Handmaid's Tale* is her most famous book, and its title and themes are often invoked even in contemporary discussions about women's rights and theocracies.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Atwood has written that her research on 17th-century American Puritans, who created a rigid and inhumane theocracy based on a few choice selections from the Bible, influenced Gilead. But the novel also responds to the modern political scene in America. The religious right, with its moralizing tendencies, was gaining power in America as backlash to the left-wing Free Love and feminist movements. In the 1970's, Jerry Falwell and other Christian leaders urged the Republican party to bring prayer back to schools, diminish abortion rights, and defeat the Equal Rights Amendment, which was meant to support women. *The Handmaid's Tale* shows how religion can be used as an excuse to reduce women's rights, a political tendency which continues to occur all over the world.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The title of the novel references Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a medieval collection of stories about religious pilgrims going to Canterbury, with titles like "The Miller's Tale." Though Chaucer's stories have nothing to do with dystopias or feminism, they reveal the foolishness and sinfulness of supposedly religious people, and Atwood's title shows that we should consider her futuristic story as part of a very old tradition of storytelling. With its emphasis on labeling and female shame, the book also bears similarities to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. And in a short essay about the book, Atwood compares it to *1984*, *Brave New World*, and *A Clockwork Orange*—other widely influential dystopian fictions with political undertones, that quietly suggest that the worlds they portray aren't so far off from our world.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Handmaid's Tale*
- **When Written:** Early 1980s
- **Where Written:** West Berlin
- **When Published:** 1985
- **Literary Period:** Feminist
- **Genre:** Speculative Fiction / Science Fiction / Dystopia
- **Setting:** Cambridge, Massachusetts under the dystopian government of the Republic of Gilead, which has replaced the United States.
- **Climax:** The Eyes, or maybe the Mayday Resistance, come to pick up Offred
- **Antagonist:** Though the Commander, Serena Joy, and Aunt Lydia seem to be Offred's enemies, the real antagonist is the Republic of Gilead itself.
- **Point of View:** First person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

A Movie...and an Opera The Handmaid's Tale became a movie in 1990 (with a screenplay mostly written by the acclaimed playwright Harold Pinter), and an opera (with music by the Danish composer Poul Ruders) in 2000. Both productions received mixed reviews. In the movie, Duke University's campus subs in for Harvard in the Salvaging scene.

Speculative Fiction or Science Fiction? Atwood insists on the label speculative fiction for the novel, since she thinks its events could actually occur, whereas those of science fiction are more far-fetched. This distinction has drawn debate and ire from science fiction writers.

PLOT SUMMARY

The United States has fallen, overthrown by a theocratic regime, founded on rigid Christian principles and the disempowerment of women, which has installed a new nation called Gilead in its place. The novel begins with Offred, the first-person narrator, remembering her restricted life at the Rachel and Leah Center, a training camp for Handmaids in an old high school. The scene changes to her current residence, where she lives with a Commander and his wife, Serena Joy. Offred puts on a red uniform and goes on a shopping trip with Ofglen, and afterwards they stop by the Wall to look at the

bodies of recently executed men.

In the evening, Offred lies in bed. She remembers her spunky friend Moira, her activist mother, and the loss of her daughter and her husband, Luke. She thinks about the previous Handmaid who left a Latin message scratched into the wall. She describes her trip to the doctor on the previous day. The doctor suggested that her Commander might be sterile and offers to have sex with her. Though her life depends on getting pregnant, Offred refused.

She takes a bath and thinks about her daughter and the hysterical Handmaid Janine. After her bath, she and the rest of the members of the household gather to listen to the Commander read the bible. Then the Commander, the Commander's wife Serena Joy, and Offred perform the Ceremony: the Commander has impersonal sex with Offred while she lies between Serena Joy's legs. Afterwards, Offred sneaks downstairs in a rebellious gesture and runs into Nick, who gives her a message from the Commander to meet the following night.

The next day, Offred and other Handmaids attend Janine's birth. In the afternoon, Offred remembers how Moira managed to escape from the Rachel and Leah Center disguised as an Aunt. In the evening she sees the Commander, who surprisingly only wants to play Scrabble and get a chaste kiss. Afterwards she can't stop laughing.

Months pass. Offred and the Commander meet often, and the Ceremony becomes more fraught for Offred now that she and the Commander know each other. Offred and Ofglen go shopping regularly, and Ofglen reveals that she's part of a secret organized resistance. Offred recalls all the events that lead from the US government to the Republic of Gilead—a massacre of the President and Congress, a succession of restrictive measures imposed for "safety," the removal of all power and possessions from women. One night the Commander explains the meaning of the previous Handmaid's Latin, and Offred learns that the previous Handmaid hanged herself.

After a shopping trip one day, Serena Joy tells Offred to have sex with Nick in an effort to get pregnant, and Offred agrees. Offred and Ofglen attend a Prayvaganza, celebrating arranged marriages. Afterward, Serena Joy shows Offred a photo of her daughter. That night, the Commander gives Offred a skimpy outfit and makeup, and Nick drives them to a nightclub/hotel filled with prostitutes. Offred spots Moira across the room, and they meet in the bathroom. Moira reveals that she spent many months on the Underground Femaleroad before she was captured. Offred and the Commander get a room and have sex, and Offred has to fake arousal.

Shortly after returning home, Serena Joy leads Offred to Nick, and Offred doesn't have to fake arousal this time. Time passes, and Offred sees Nick often. She becomes so obsessed with him that she doesn't want to leave or help Ofglen with Resistance efforts. Offred and Ofglen attend a Women's Salvaging, where three women are hanged. Afterwards there's a Particicution, a frenzied group murder of a supposed rapist, who was actually a member of the Resistance. The following day, a new Handmaid comes for the shopping trip with Offred. She says that the old Ofglen committed suicide when the Eyes—the Gilead secret police—came to get her.

When Offred returns home after shopping, Serena Joy confronts her with the skimpy outfit and threatens to punish her. Offred goes to her room and sees the Eyes coming for her. Nick tells her that they're secretly members of the Resistance, and she enters their van, unsure of her fate.

The novel ends with "Historical Notes" from a future academic conference about Gilead. Professor Pieixoto describes the discovery of Offred's narrative on cassette tapes in Maine, suggesting that the Eyes that took her *were* part of the Resistance, as Nick claimed. It is revealed that researchers may have discovered who the Commander was, but no one knows what happened to Offred.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Offred — The novel's protagonist and first-person narrator, Handmaid of the Commander and Serena Joy, former wife of Luke, and lover of Nick. We never learn her real name (Offred means "Of Fred," her Commander), and we know little about her physical appearance. She has brown hair, stands about five foot seven, and is 33 years old. Before Gilead, she had a daughter with Luke at about age 25. Moira was her best friend from college, and she had a rocky relationship with her radical, outrageous mother. Though Offred is rebellious, even violent, in her thoughts, and full of passionate memories, she seems stolid and devout to outsiders, doing her best to obey Gilead's laws. Readers may be quick to judge Offred for her passivity, but her keen observations and honest emotions, even after the terror and brainwashing that she's encountered, demonstrate the limitations of Gilead's power over its subjects.

The Commander — The head of the household where Offred serves as a Handmaid, and husband of Serena Joy. The Commander has gray hair, wears a black suit, and looks "like a Midwestern bank president." Though he is a high-ranking official of Gilead who may have played a large role in its construction, he breaks many laws, including going to the sex club Jezebel's (and at least once hiring Moira), and spending time with Offred. Though he attributes many of his misogynistic attitudes to "Nature," he cares for Offred's well being, and often wants to know her opinion on controversial matters.

Serena Joy — Also known as the Commander's Wife, she is

unable to have children and therefore requires Offred's services. Before Gilead, she was a singer who became famous on TV for her emotional Christian music. She also used to give speeches about how women ought to be housewives. During the novel, she occupies her time gardening with Nick's help, and knitting elaborate scarves for soldiers, despite her arthritis. For much of the novel, she resentfully ignores Offred, but towards the end she encourages Offred to try to get pregnant by having sex with Nick.

Nick — The Commander's driver and Serena Joy's helper in the garden, and Offred's lover. Nick's official position is Guardian, and he seems to be low-ranking because he hasn't been assigned a woman. From the beginning, he roguishly rejects some of Gilead's strictures (by rolling up his uniform sleeves, for example), but the Commander and Serena Joy find him trustworthy and get his help for their own misdeeds. He is secretive and discreet, and Offred can never quite figure out what he's thinking, even during their love affair. The question of his true alliances comes to a head at the book's cliffhanger ending, but the postscript "Notes" suggest that he was working for the Resistance after all.

Luke — Offred's pre-Gilead husband and father of her daughter. He was previously married and had a long affair with Offred before divorcing his first wife. Though Offred passes a lot of time remembering him, he seems to have been frequently at odds with her emotions. He doesn't seem greatly distressed when Offred loses her job and must cede all her money to him. Perhaps he lacks sympathy, or perhaps he's sexist. After their failed escape, Offred imagines many fates for him, but never pictures him joining with Gilead, although subtext suggests that he might have.

Moira — Offred's best friend in college, a brave, opinionated feminist lesbian whom Offred encounters again at the Rachel and Leah Center. After one failed attempt, she manages to escape the Center and move along the Underground Femaleroad, but the Eyes capture and torture her. She decides to work as a prostitute rather than go to the Colonies (the Colonies are essentially a death sentence). When Offred sees her at Jezebel's, it seems that the authorities have managed to break Moira's spirit.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Offred's Mother — A radical feminist before Gilead, she marched at abortion rights and anti-rape protests and burnt pornography. Offred used to resent her showy, fanatical behavior, but now she regrets their difficult relationship. She ends up cleaning toxic waste in the Colonies. We never learn her real name.

Offred's Daughter — Offred's daughter with Luke was five during their failed escape attempt, when Gileadean authorities removed her to place with another family. During the time of the novel, she would be about eight. Like Offred's mother, we never learn her name.

Aunt Lydia — The Aunt in charge at the Rachel and Leah Center and the Woman's Salvaging. Her opinions and sayings constantly run through Offred's head, evidence of effective brainwashing.

Ofglen — Offred's shopping partner and a member of the Mayday Resistance who suddenly disappears.

Janine — Also known as Ofwarren, a Handmaid from Offred's class at the Rachel and Leah Center. She gets hysterical easily. She's criticized and broken down at the Center, but Offred has no sympathy for her.

Rita — A Martha (household servant and cook) at the household of the Commander and Serena Joy. She thinks of Offred as a slut and is generally unkind.

Cora — A Martha, along with Rita. She does less cooking and more general chores, and is friendlier to Offred. She discovered the previous Handmaid's death.

The Previous Handmaid — Offred never meets the previous Handmaid of Serena Joy and the Commander, but her presence looms over the house. She scratched an encouraging slogan in the closet, but hanged herself from the ceiling.

Professor Pieixoto — A professor at Cambridge University in 2195 and a specialist in 20th and 21st century history. The keynote speaker in the Historical Notes.

The Doctor — An obstetrician/gynecologist-type doctor with brown eyes and hair, who checks on Offred's sexual health, then offers to try to impregnate her.

Aunt Helena — Helps during Janine's testifying at the Rachel and Leah Center. She used to lead Weight Watchers', so she's good at encouraging testimonials.

Aunt Elizabeth — She taught Gyn Ed at the Rachel and Leah Center, and is a sort of midwife who helps with Janine's birth. The Aunt that Moira threatens and ties up in the furnace room during her second escape attempt.

Aunt Sara – An aunt at the Rachel and Leah center, who watches over the women in the center while carrying a cattle prod.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

GENDER ROLES

Gilead is a strictly hierarchical society, with a huge difference between the genders. As soon as the Gileadean revolutionaries take over after terrorism destroys the US government, they fire all women from their jobs and drain their bank accounts, leaving Offred desperate and dependent. Luke, however, doesn't seem so furious at this turn of events, a subtle suggestion that even good men may have embedded misogynistic attitudes, and that Gilead merely takes these common views to the logical extreme. Soon Gileadean women find all liberties taken from them, from the right to choose their clothes to the right to read.

Even women in positions of power, like Aunt Lydia, are only allowed cattle prods, never guns. The Commander's Wife, once a powerful supporter of far right-wing religious ideas about how women should stay in the home, now finds herself unhappily trapped in the world she advocated for. Gilead also institutionalizes sexual violence toward women. The Ceremony, where the Commander tries to impregnate Offred, is institutionalized adultery and a kind of rape. Jezebel's, where Moira works, is a whorehouse for the society's elite.

Though the story critiques the religious right, it also shows that the feminist left, as exemplified by Offred's mother, is not the solution, as the radical feminists, too, advocate book burnings, censorship, and violence. The book avoids black-and-white divisions, forcing us to take on our own assumptions regarding gender. We may blame Offred for being too passive, without acknowledging that she's a product of her society. We may fault the Commander's Wife for not showing solidarity to her gender and rebelling against Gilead, without understanding that this expectation, since it assumes that gender is the most important trait, is just a milder version of the anti-individual tyranny of Gilead. These complicated questions of blame, as well as the brutal depictions of the oppression of women, earn *The Handmaid's Tale* its reputation as a great work of feminist literature.

RELIGION AND THEOCRACY

Gilead is a theocracy, a government where church and state are combined. Religious language enters into every part of the society, from Rita's position as a Martha, named for a New Testament kitchen worker, to the store names like Milk and Honey. And religion, specifically the Old Testament, is also the justification for many of Gilead's most savage characteristics. Offred's job as Handmaid is based on the biblical precedent of Rachel and Leah, where fertile servants can carry on adulterous relationships to allow infertile women like the Commander's Wife to have families. Each month before the Ceremony, the Commander reads from Genesis the same lines that make the book's epigraph, justifying and moralizing the crude intercourse that will take place.

Yet many of the biblical quotes in the book are twisted. The theocracy is so rigid about its religious influences, and so emphatic about the specific rules it upholds, that it even warps essential virtues like charity, tolerance and forgiveness. Offred knows that the prayers that the Aunts play the Handmaids in the Rachel and Leah Center are not the words that actually appear in the Bible, but she has no way of checking. The Salvagings and executions are supposedly the penalty for biblical sins like adultery, but Offred knows that others are executed for resisting the government. *The Handmaid's Tale* is not a criticism of the Bible in itself, but a criticism of the way that people and theocracies use the Bible for their own oppressive purposes.

FERTILITY

Fertility is the reason for Offred's captivity and the source of her power, Gilead's major failing and its hope for the future. Inhabitants of Gilead give many reasons for the society's issues with creating viable offspring: the sexual revolution and birth control, pollution, sexually transmitted diseases. And the book hints at other, more subtle problems: in a society that restricts women so much, treating the potential child-bearers alternately as precious objects, bothersome machines, and prostitute-like sources of shame, how could anyone conceive? Similarly, though Offred knows her life depends on a successful birth, the atmosphere of extreme pressure and fear can't be as successful a motivator as the hope, love and liberty that characterized life with her first daughter and Luke. Despite the sterile atmosphere, markers of fertility, such as flowers and worms, throng in the Commander's Wife's carefully tended garden.

The Commander and his wife host Offred for her proven fertility, and they even rename her as Fred's possession—her body's functions are valued, but her personhood is not. This division is highlighted in Janine's Birthing Ceremony, where Janine's Commander's Wife pretends to give birth at the same time, and the faked birth is treated as the authentic one. In this way, Gilead manages to strip away even the Handmaid's connection to the babies they bear in a version of a sharing, collective society gone totally wrong.

REBELLION

Every major character in the story engages in some kind of disobedience against Gilead's laws. Moira rebels most boldly, disguising herself and managing to escape from the Handmaids' imprisonment, though her daring escape proves futile, and she ends up at Jezebel's, resigned to her fate. Ofglen's rebellion is more community-minded, since she works as part of an organized resistance, although her careful plotting also ends badly. More unexpected

are the small-scale rebellions from the Commander and the Commander's Wife.

The Commander seems to have every advantage, being a man, powerful in the new regime, and wealthy. Gilead should be his ideal society, especially since the book suggests that he had a role in designing it. Yet he desires a deeper emotional connection, and cares enough about Offred's well-being to break the law and consort with her beyond his duties. The Commander's Wife also tries to get around the strictures of Gilead, setting Offred up with Nick in an illegal attempt to make a family.

These rebellious acts, coming from Gilead's privileged group, add complexity to their characters and to the dystopia as a whole. No one in the book is purely evil, and no one is so different from real-world humans to fully embrace the lack of independence in Gilead. Whether large or small, attempting to destroy the Gileadean government or merely to make one's personal circumstances more tolerable, each character commits rebellious acts, highlighting both the unlivable horror of Gileadean society, and the unsteadiness of its foundations.

LOVE

Despite Offred's general passivity in the face of the oppressive society, she has a deep and secret source of strength: her love. Though love might keep Offred complacent, permitting her to daydream rather than to rebel outright, it's also responsible for the book's greatest triumph, as love drives Nick to help Offred escape, which she manages more effectively than Moira or Ofglen. Her love for her mother, her daughter, Luke, Moira, and ultimately Nick, allow her to stay sane, and to live within her memories and emotions instead of the terrible world around her. Although the novel never proposes an ideal society or a clear way to apply its message to the real world, and although the novel looks critically both on many modern movements, including the religious right and the extreme feminist left, love—both familial and romantic—surprisingly turns out to be the most effective force for good.

Love is also a driving force behind other characters' actions. We know that Nick reciprocates Offred's feelings, but also the search for love, in the form of a real, not purely functional human connection, influences the Commander's desires to bend the rules for Offred. In the end, love is the best way to get around Gilead's rules, as it allows for both secret mental resistance, and for the trust and risk that result in Offred's great escape.

STORYTELLING AND MEMORY

The structure of *The Handmaid's Tale* is characterized by many different kinds of storytelling and fiction-making. For one, the title itself, and the fictional "Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale" of the book's end, frame the entire novel as Offred's story, that she's said into a tape recorder in the old fashioned storytelling tradition. For another, her whole story is also punctuated by shorter stories she tells herself, of the time before Gilead or Aunt Lydia's lessons. These small flashbacks can be triggered by the slightest impression, and they occur so often throughout the novel that it seems like Offred lives in several worlds, the terrible present, the confusing but free past, and the Rachel and Leah Center that bridged them.

Adding to the overlap of past and present, the tenses are always shifting, with some memories in the past tense, and some in the present. A third form of storytelling comes about because of the constant atmosphere of paranoia and uncertainty. Offred constantly makes up fictions. She's filled with questions—is Ofglen a true believer, or lying? Is Nick's touching her foot accidental, or intentional? Offred must keep several stories in mind at once, imagining each to be true at the same time. This form of storytelling is most clear in her imaginings about Luke's fate, where he could be dead, imprisoned or maybe escaped.

Fourth, Offred also uses storytelling as a pastime. Since she has no access to any entertainment, and very few events happen in her life, she often goes over events from other people's points of view, making up very involved fictions about what others might be thinking and saying. One major example is her long imaginary recreation of Aunt Lydia and Janine talking about Moira. Another is her creative ideas about what Nick might think of her and the Commander's relationship. With more stories and memories than current-time actions, the book is profoundly repetitive. It forms its own kind of simple, quiet hell—we, like Offred, are trapped within the echo-chamber of her mind.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE COLOR RED

The color red appears constantly in the novel. Red is the color of the Handmaids, a color associated both with shame (think of *The Scarlet Letter*) and with ripeness and fertility. Offred expands the color's symbolic power, using it to describe blood, sometimes as the life force that courses through her body, and sometimes as a marker of violence and death, like the blood on the executed criminals. One of the most common uses of the color is to describe the tulips in Serena Joy's garden. The flowers are sex organs, but their flourishing will be futile, since Serena Joy snips off their fruits.

THE EYE

The novel is filled with eyes, which represent key topics like paranoia, surveillance, and Gilead's authority. The Eyes are the terrifying, violent and secretive enforcers of Gilead's laws. As Offred worries that anyone she meets, from the doctor to Ofglen, might be an Eye, she also sees eyes everywhere, from a tour guide's badge to her own ankle tattoo. The most complex eye in the book is the plastered-over light socket in Offred's room, which Offred imagines as a blinded eye. Later she learns that the previous Handmaid hanged herself from the light fixture that used to be there, so that blinded eye comes to signify death and freedom as well.

MAKEUP

Makeup contains many contradictions relating to power and sexuality. It signifies femininity, the past, and Offred's lost freedom to control her appearance. But others, like the Commander, think that the lack of makeup is actually a source of freedom, since women now don't have to use their appearances to compete for mates. Still, the Commander enjoys going to Jezebel's, where every woman wears makeup with the hopes of attracting business. Handmaids especially shouldn't attempt to be beautiful, which would add another layer of difficulty for the Wives and Commanders they serve. Yet Offred does her best to maintain her appearance, carefully saving her butter as moisturizing lotion, even in a house with no mirrors.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Houghton Mifflin Company edition of *The Handmaid's Tale* published in 1986.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability?

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

The novel opens with Offred recalling the time she spent inside a building that was formerly used as a school, which the reader later learns is the Rachel and Leah Re-Education Center, or the "Red Center." Offred has described the gymnasium, imagining the activities that took place there before the school was turned into the Red Center––activities that invoke the lively, happy, and carefree mood of youth. She says that the atmosphere now is one of "yearning," although it's not clear what for.

This abstract longing is explained by the fact that people of Offred's age and older were alive before the United States became the Republic of Gilead, and thus remember what the world was like before; however, their memories are vague, and their nostalgia for the past turns into a desire for an unknown future. The word "insatiability"––meaning a hunger or desire that cannot be satisfied––indicates the shame associated with desire in the world of the novel. Indeed, "insatiable" is often used in a sexual context, and Offred's words thus evoke disgust and condemnation of women's sexuality––a phenomenon that exists in our modern world, yet is vastly exaggerated in Gilead. In this context, the women's "insatiable" desire is simply for a world in which they are free and equal.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ Waste not want not. I am not being wasted. Why do I want?

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

Having recalled the time she spent sleeping in the gymnasium of the Red Center, Offred has moved on to describe a second room, which we later learn is her bedroom in the Commander's house. She has detailed the sparse furnishings and the plastered-over light socket in the ceiling, which reminds her of an eye socket. Offred notes that the rug looks like "folk art," reflective of a cultural preference for artifacts that are handmade by women. She observes that this reflects "a return to traditional values" and the principle "waste not want not." Offred's statement that she is not being wasted highlights the way in which women are used like tools or instruments in Gilead, treated as objects with no value beyond their designated function,

which, for Offred, is her fertility.

Once again, Offred invokes the moral disdain for desire, and particularly desire felt by women. She expresses the view that because she is "not being wasted," it is strange or illogical that she should "want." This reveals that Offred has internalized the idea that women are more like objects than people, and that it is abnormal or morally wrong for women to experience the most basic human emotions, including desire. Her use of a well-known saying highlights how deeply embedded this idea is within the culture of Gilead.

❝ I try not to think too much. Like other things now, thought must be rationed.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

Offred has continued describing her room in the Commander's house, and recalled Aunt Lydia telling her to "think of it as like being in the army." She describes the single bed in the room, saying that the only thing that happens there is sleep ("or no sleep"), and says that she "rations" her thoughts. This statement highlights the austere, dull scarcity of life in Gilead. Not only has Offred lost access to material pleasures, intimacy with others, and freedom, but even her thoughts are restricted and impoverished by the oppressive world in which she lives. Offred's admission that she tries not to "think too much" suggests that too much thinking is dangerous, especially for women who, like her, live such tightly controlled lives.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

Offred has described a routine shopping outing with Ofglen, the only time the women are allowed out of the house. Nick has winked at her, which makes her worry that he is an Eye. Offred and Ofglen pass a checkpoint manned by two Guardians, one of whom looks at Offred's face; as she walks away, Offred swings her hips, hoping to inspire sexual desire in the Guardians and saying she enjoys the power of her desirability, which she compares to the "power of a dog bone." This scene reveals that the intense repression in Gilead has not successfully eliminated sexual desire and activity, but simply forced it to be expressed in more secretive and subtle ways. Similarly, although Offred's power and freedom are severely restricted, they cannot be erased altogether; her "passive" power remains.

Although the particular situation described in this passage seems far from life in the contemporary United States, the fundamental questions it raises are nonetheless relevant. What does it mean to have "passive power"? Does this power ultimately make Offred more or less free? By comparing herself to a dog bone, Offred emphasizes that she is treated as an object. Yet at the same time, she illustrates that even sexual objects exert influence over others––indeed, it is precisely this influence that threatens the repressive and misogynistic ideology of Gilead.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it.

Related Characters: Offred, Aunt Lydia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 24

Explanation and Analysis

Offred has continued to describe her walk through town, reflecting on the differences between the world she currently lives in and the society in which she grew up. She has recalled that there were "rules" for women's behavior in the time before Gilead, such as not opening the door to a stranger and not turning around if someone whistled at you. She remembers Aunt Lydia telling her that in the old days, women only had "freedom to," but now they have "freedom from," and that she should be grateful for this. To some extent, Aunt Lydia's words seem ridiculous; clearly, Offred is far less free than she was before she was made a Handmaid, proving that "freedom from" is not equal to "freedom to," and perhaps shouldn't be considered "freedom" at all.

On the other hand, Offred's description of the "rules" for

women that existed in the past demonstrates that during this time women were not completely free, either. Although Aunt Lydia exaggerates how terrible life was for women before the Gilead regime, Offred's comparison reminds the reader that throughout history women have been oppressed and controlled, often with the explanation that this is for their own protection.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it. I must believe it. Those who can believe that such stories are only stories have a better chance.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Offred is lying in bed, and has recalled hazy memories from different moments in her life, featuring Moira, her mother, and her daughter. She has recalled waking up from a drug-induced sleep to find that her daughter had been taken from her and assigned to another family. She confesses that she wants to believe that "this is a story I'm telling," as this will help her to survive. There are several layers of meaning to Offred's wish. On the surface, she seems to be referring to the importance of storytelling as a way to preserve one's dignity, and to feel loved and valued. Offred believes she will have "a better chance" to survive if she can imagine one day escaping her life as a Handmaid and telling her story to a willing listener.

However, although the reader does not yet know it, the novel *is* a story that Offred is telling; the "Historical Notes" at the end of the book reveal that the narrative was found recorded on audio cassettes in Maine. This suggests that perhaps Offred means she wishes her experiences were *only* a story. Even while relating the terrible events that happened to her, she wishes to believe they are only a story in order to preserve her sanity and dignity.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ We thought we had such problems. How were we to know we were happy?

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Offred has described the time when she first arrived at the Commander's house and spent hours looking around her new bedroom. This memory has then made her think of hotel rooms, and the time she spent having an affair with Luke while he was still married. She reflects that at the time they thought they had "such problems" and did not appreciate how happy they truly were.

This passage conveys the clichéd wisdom of not being able to appreciate what you have until it's gone. Regardless of how difficult it might have been to conduct their affair in secret, at least Offred and Luke were free, and loved each other. At the same time, Offred does not condemn or resent her former inability to enjoy the freedom she had, asking rhetorically how she could have known otherwise.

❝ Nolite te bastardes carborandorum.

Related Characters: The Previous Handmaid (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

Offred has returned to the memory of looking around the bedroom when she first arrived at the Commander's house. She recalls looking inside a cupboard, and describes seeing hooks and wondering why no one has removed them. In the darkest corner of the cupboard, someone has scratched the phrase "Nolite te bastardes carborandorum," Latin for "Don't let the bastards grind you down." Offred suspects the words are written in Latin, but as she doesn't know the language she cannot confirm if this is true, or figure out what they mean. However, the message pleases her, if only because it is a secret piece of communication that has not been discovered or erased.

Later in the novel, we find out that the words were written by the previous Handmaid, who hanged herself. At first this fact seems incredibly bleak, as it suggests the previous Handmaid was not able to follow her own advice, and could not bear to live imprisoned in the Commander's house. On the other hand, there is also a note of hope within the secret message. Perhaps the previous Handmaid committed suicide not as a way of giving up, but as a final act of defiance

against the "bastards" who attempted to control her. Meanwhile, her words give courage to Offred even though Offred can't understand them, showing the power of hope and solidarity.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Nothing changes instantaneously: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Offred is once again lost in her memories, recalling Aunt Lydia describing, horrified, the way women used to dress with, while meanwhile Moira was planning an "underwhore" party in which she would sell lingerie to women. With the benefit of hindsight, Offred sees how the extreme misogyny in Gilead came to be, though she notes that at the time people dismissed evidence that society was headed in this direction. As a result, society changed in a severe way without people noticing until it was too late. This is both an accurate description of historical change and a powerful warning about the world in which we live. *The Handmaid's Tale*carefully shows how features of our present world might be distorted with nightmarish results, and this passage serves as a warning about how easily this could happen.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ I've crossed no boundaries, I've given no trust, taken no risk, all is safe. It's the choice that terrifies me. A way out, a salvation.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Offred has gone to the doctor for her monthly checkup, and the doctor has offered to have sex with her in order to help her get pregnant, an illegal offence for which they could both be killed. Although Offred refuses, she is left terrified by the incident––not because she has done anything wrong, but because she is frightened by "the choice" presented before her. This passage shows that in the tightly controlled world of Gilead, Offred has begun to lose faith in herself. After all, before she became a Handmaid, Offred attempted to escape from Gilead with her daughter and Luke, an act requiring enormous courage. However, in her present isolated condition, Offred is much more timid and passive, implying that resistance only becomes possible through solidarity and love.

At the same time, Offred's fear also emphasizes just how precarious and impossible a situation she is in. She reassures herself that "all is safe," however in reality she is not safe, no matter how submissively she obeys the rules. In fact, if she is not eventually able to get pregnant, she will be exiled or put to death anyway, an outcome that would actually mean it would have been safer to have had forbidden sex with the doctor. Given these unknowable factors, it is hardly surprising that Offred is so overwhelmed and terrified by the decision of whether or not to sleep with him.

Chapter 12. Quotes

❝ I avoid looking down at my body, not so much because it's shameful or immodest but because I don't want to see it. I don't want to look at something that determines me so completely.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Offred is having a bath, which she has at regular times that are not chosen by her. The bath has been run by Cora, who sits outside, and items such as a mirror, razor, and lock are all forbidden. In the bath is one of the only times when Offred is able to touch her own hair, which she enjoys; however, she refuses to look at her body, resenting the fact that it "determines me so completely." This passage emphasizes the fact that Offred has been reduced from being a person to being a body, an object or tool appreciated only for its use. The fact that her bath is scheduled and controlled further confirms the way in which Offred is treated like a tool or animal, rather than a person.

Note that this treatment creates a different kind of body shame from the kind promoted by a religious mindset, but a body shame nonetheless. Offred's thoughts indicate that

there is not much difference between being treated as a sex object and being "valued" for your fertility––both are equally degrading.

Chapter 13 Quotes

But maybe boredom is erotic, when women do it, for men.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Offred reflects on the fact that she has so little to do, and wishes she could pursue a hobby, such as weaving or knitting. She recalls paintings of harems that depict women looking bored, and suggests that perhaps men find boredom erotic, "when women do it." Out of context, this thought is fairly innocuous––all kinds of things can be erotic, some of them rather unexpected.

However, bearing in mind the way that women are treated in Gilead, Offred's words take on a particularly sinister meaning. The "boredom" that she experiences results from the fact that she has no freedom, independence, or access to resources. If men find this erotic, it suggests that men's sexual attraction to women includes the desire to control and belittle women.

Chapter 18 Quotes

But this is wrong, nobody dies from lack of sex. It's lack of love we die from.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

While sneaking downstairs to steal a daffodil, Offred has run into Nick, and the two share an erotically-charged moment. Back in her room, Offred remembers lying in bed with Luke while she was pregnant, and thinks that if she thought she'd never have sex again she'd die. She then corrects herself, saying that people can live without sex but not without love. This view resonates ambiguously with the events of the novel. Despite the sexual repression by the state, Gilead is a world filled with sex––from the Ceremony to Jezebel's to the illicit acts and gestures performed in secret between various characters. This indicates that people's drive to have sex will survive even the strictest repression of sexuality.

On the other hand, all that sex doesn't seem to make people very happy or provide much meaning to their lives. And for Offred herself, sex has come to play a rather negative role in her life––yet she is sustained by her memories of love. Indeed, this quotation relates back to Offred's statement that believing she is "telling a story" helps her to stay alive. Both strategies highlight the fundamental importance in trusting that there are people out there in the world who love and care about you.

Chapter 19 Quotes

A thing is valued, she says, only if it is rare and hard to get.

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

Offred has been taken to Janine's house, where Janine is giving birth. As they wait to find out if the baby is healthy, Offred experiences a flashback to the Red Center, where Aunt Lydia taught her and the other Handmaids about the causes of infertility, including the history of sexual contraception. Offred resentfully recalls Aunt Lydia's statement that "a thing is valued... only if it is rare and hard to get." Aunt Lydia is referring to women's sexual availability, and once again, it is clear that in Gilead women are considered to be no more than "things." Aunt Lydia's concern over value is similarly degrading, by implying that women are not just objects but commodities whose value is conditional, rather than inherent.

Although Aunt Lydia's words seem strikingly harsh in the context of the novel, in reality she echoes much of the kind of language used to promote abstinence among unmarried young people in the real world. Even at the most basic level, many young women are encouraged to play "hard to get" or otherwise not agree to sex too early or enthusiastically. By drawing this parallel with our contemporary world, Atwood once again emphasizes that the contemporary U.S. may not be as far from Gilead as we think.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ You wanted a women's culture. Well, now there is one. It isn't what you meant, but it exists. Be thankful for small mercies.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker), Offred's Mother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

Offred is at Janine's house while Janine is giving birth, and has been recalling her time in the Red Center, when the women were shown videos of "unwomen." One of these videos showed Offred's mother at a feminist rally, and Offred then remembers the fights she and her mother used to have about feminism. At the Red Centre, she recalls thinking about her mother, who had "wanted a women's culture." The Red Centre––along with the whole structure of Handmaids, wives, and other castes of women––is, as Offred reflects in this passage, a "women's culture" of sorts. Socialization is segregated by gender, so women spend time almost exclusively with other women, engaged in "feminine" activities such as housework.

This passage suggests that Offred believes radical feminism was part of a chain of events that led to the establishment of Gilead. While she acknowledges that the hyper-religious, restricted world she now lives in is far from what her mother and other feminists intended, it seems that the backlashagainst radical feminist activity helped to bring about this new, ultra traditional era. Her comment "Be thankful for small mercies" is largely ironic, a reference to the religious imperative that Offred be grateful for the hellish world in which she now lives. On the other hand, we could perhaps read a note of sincerity in it, too – although the "women's culture" Offred now lives in is misogynist and oppressive, there are several moments when she finds strength and solidarity through her connections to other women, such as Moira, Ofglen, and the previous Handmaid.

Chapter 23 Quotes

❝ But remember that forgiveness too is a power. To beg for it is a power, and to withhold or bestow it is a power, perhaps the greatest. Maybe none of this is about control…maybe it's about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Offred has returned to the Commander's house after the birth of Janine's baby, where she thinks about the nature of storytelling and memory. She reflects on the "temptation" to forgive, and muses that perhaps the Gilead regime is "about who can do what to whom and be forgiven for it." Offred contrasts this to the thought that Gilead is about "control"; yet her words suggest that being forgiven is perhaps an even more extreme version of control, because control itself consists of "who can do what to whom."

This passage is an important reminder that even the strictest totalitarian regimes are made up of thousands of interpersonal relationships. Offred's thoughts point out that even the most cruel and oppressive people want to be forgiven for the suffering they inflict on others.

Chapter 24 Quotes

❝ You can think clearly only with your clothes on.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

Offred has secretly spent an evening with the Commander, playing an illicit game of Scrabble and then sharing a kiss. Back in her room, she sits on her bed with her clothes on, waiting before taking them off because she can't think clearly without them.

This observation reveals the complexity of the various forms of oppression to which women are subjected in the novel. In many ways, Offred's extremely modest and unwieldy Handmaid's uniform is oppressive––it robs her of individuality, and implies that her body is shameful. On the other hand, this quotation shows that nakedness can also be disempowering. Although her uniform is somewhat ridiculous and uncomfortable, Offred evidently feels protected by it. Her words suggest that concealing her body allows freedom and clarity in her mind.

Chapter 26 Quotes

❝ "Why expect one woman to carry out all the functions necessary to the serene running of a household? It isn't reasonable or humane. Your daughters will have greater freedom."

Related Characters: Aunt Lydia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

Offred and the Commander have continued to meet in secret and their relationship grows friendlier; this then makes it awkward for both of them to participate in the Ceremony. Offred recalls Aunt Lydia telling her that, once the population has grown large enough, the Gilead regime hopes that every family will have a Handmaid. In this passage, Aunt Lydia explaining the reason behind such a policy, in terms that perversely echo certain forms of feminist rhetoric. As with her previous statement about "freedom to" and "freedom from," Aunt Lydia couches her logic in terms of freedom. Her words suggest that, even though the Handmaid system requires women to have a preassinged role not chosen by them, they will ultimately be more free because they will not have to run their household alone.

There are, of course, clear logical and ethical problems in Aunt Lydia's argument. Most obviously, she fails to address why "the serene running of a household" is entirely the responsibility of women, without any input or responsibility from men. At the same time, Aunt Lydia's words relate to a criticism of certain types of feminism that exist in the real world. Some people argue that the American feminist movement of the 1970s and 80s created a system in which well-educated, middle and upper-class women were able to pursue the "freedom" of a career at the expense of domestic workers who then had to take on responsibilities such as cleaning and childcare. Although this situation is different from Gilead in many ways, Offred's role as a Handmaid is comparable to the experience of these domestic workers.

Chapter 28 Quotes

❝ He doesn't mind this, I thought. He doesn't mind it at all. Maybe he even likes it. We are not each other's, anymore. Instead, I am his.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker), Luke

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

Offred has finally explained how the United States turned into the Republic of Gilead, recalling the time when, like all other women, she was fired from her job and had her bank account drained. She explains that she considered protesting, but that Luke encouraged her not to for her own safety. Instead, she became a housewife, and in this passage she remembers suspecting that Luke might have liked this shift in power. This is a surprising and important moment in the narrative, when Offred's relationship with Luke is shown to be more complicated than it first appears.There is no doubt that Offred loves Luke––the memory of him and hope that she might one day see him again sustains her, allowing her to survive her torturous life as a Handmaid.

On the other hand, even Offred and Luke's devotion to one another cannot remain untainted by sexism and by the wider political situation in which they find themselves. Although Offred loves Luke, she can't help but suspect that he doesn't mind or even enjoys the power that the new state of affairs gives him over her. However, she never asks him about it, implying that sexism creates a communicative gulf between men and women, even those who love and trust each other. It seems that only in a truly equal society would men and women be able to love and communicate with total honesty.

Chapter 33 Quotes

❝ But people will do anything rather than admit that their lives have no meaning. No use, that is. No plot.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

Ofred and Ofglen have gone to a Prayvaganza, and Oflgen observes that Janine has been moved to another family because the baby she had turned out to be a "shredder." Ofglen reveals that Janine thinks she has been punished by God for having sex with the doctor in order to get pregnant; Offred reflects that Janine only thinks this way to give her life a sense of meaning, a coherent "plot." This thought draws an interesting parallel between religion and

storytelling.

Just as Janine and other true believers convince themselves that they live in order to please God, Offred gives her own life meaning by making a story out of it. This comparison allows Offred to feel sympathy for even the most reprehensible characters in the novel, as she believes their actions are motivated by their own fear and suffering.

Chapter 40 Quotes

❝ All I can hope for is a reconstruction: the way love feels is always only approximate.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 263

Explanation and Analysis

Compelled by Serena Joy, Offred has gone to Nick's apartment in order to have sex with him in the hope of getting pregnant. Offred tells several versions of her encounter with Nick; the first portrays the experience as positive and passionate, the second as awkward and transactional. She then admits that it is hard to accurately recreate what happened between them, saying "the way love feels is always only approximate."

Here Offred connects the experience of love to storytelling and memory. Indeed, these two themes are closely intertwined in the narrative, as many of Offred's memories are of times when she felt loved. However, the connection also illuminates the fact that both love and memory are elusive––we can never be sure of our perception of either.

Chapter 41 Quotes

❝ Humanity is so adaptable, my mother would say. Truly amazing, what people can get used to, as long as there are a few compensations.

Related Characters: Offred's Mother (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

Offred has started seeing Nick more regularly, enjoying her time with him and even idolizing him. When Ofglen offers to help her escape, Offred admits to herself that she no longer really wants to leave. At times, she feels that she loves Nick, but on other occasions she reasons that it is not love but simply necessity; she remembers her mother saying that people are "so adaptable," and that is amazing what they "can get used to." The world depicted in the novel reveals the truth of Offred's mother's words. Despite how quickly society has changed, and despite how oppressive life now is, people find ways to keep going and survive.

However, it is debatable whether or not this is really a good thing. While adaptability and survival skills are impressive, they are also shown to be selfish. After all, now that Offred has managed to make life more enjoyable, she has lost interest in the Resistance. Adapting to one's circumstances can also, then, be interpreted as acquiescing to being controlled by others, as well as ignoring the plight of those who are in a worse position.

Chapter 46 Quotes

❝ And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.

Related Characters: Offred (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

The Eye van has arrived at the Commander's house to take Offred away, and Offred is terrified, wishing that she had killed herself while she had the chance. However, Nick has told her that the people in the van are actually members of the Resistance posing as Eyes; this is somewhat supported by the fact that they refuse to tell the Commander and Serena Joy why they are arresting Offred (although this is not conclusive). The final sentence of Offred's narrative describes her getting in the van, unsure if she is stepping into darkness or light. "Darkness" in this passage symbolizes suffering, death, and the meaninglessness of Offred's life if she is indeed killed by the state. "Light" is hope, morality, and the possibility of escape from Gilead, or even the end of the regime altogether.

This final sentence leaves the reader unsure of Offred's fate; given everything else that has happened in the novel, it seems almost equally likely that Offred will die or be saved. This ambiguity is connected to the novel's ambivalent presentation of human nature. Every major character in the

narrative has the capacity to act in a cruel and selfish way, while also possessing at least some redeeming features. Offred's unknown destiny thus emphasizes the fact that people's behavior is difficult to predict, and the fate of the world is thus equally hard to determine.

Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale Quotes

❝ We must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadean. Surely we have learned by now that such judgments are of necessity culture-specific…our job is not to censure but to understand."

Related Characters: Professor Pieixoto (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 302

Explanation and Analysis

The "Historical Notes on the Handmaid's Tale," the final section of the novel, is an invented transcript of a speech at an academic conference on "Gileadean Studies" in the year 2195. Professor Pieixoto, an expert on Gilead from Cambridge University, has explained that he found Offred's story recorded on cassette tapes in Maine. Early on in his talk, Professor Pieixoto emphasizes that "we must be cautious about passing moral judgment upon the Gileadean."

At first glance, this passage can be read as a critique of the cultural relativism that has become dominant in the academic world and in contemporary feminism. Although it is usually good not to be overly judgmental, it is difficult to read Offred's story and be neutral about the world it depicts. Further, one could certainly argue that to insist on not judging the Gileadean's is to treat their society's terrible and oppressive treatment of women as legitimate and acceptable.Additionally, consider the impact of the choice to make Professor Pieixoto a man. Perhaps the dispassionate attitude he encourages is only possible because, as a man, he does not feel as intimately connected to Offred's suffering and the issue of misogyny in general.

On the other hand, Professor Pieixoto's words do resonate with the ambiguities and complexities depicted within Offred's narrative. Most characters, including Offred herself, are shown to be motivated by a complex mix of selfishness and altruism. Even symbols of Gilead authority, such as the Commander, are depicted as being conflicted and oppressed by the world which they have created. In this sense, Professor Pieixoto's advice may cohere with the overall message of the novel.

Finally, the phrase "our job is not to censure but to understand" is particularly significant, given the fact that *The Handmaid's Tale* has frequently been banned from high school syllabi. Such bans usually occur because local authorities deem the novel's explorations of sexuality to be too explicit, but making that assessment those authorities are therefore implying that women's sexuality and bodies are somehow shameful and should be controlled rather than understood. In other words, those banning the book seem to suggest that the impulse that, in the novel, led to the creation of Gilead is widespread in American society as well.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The novel begins with the first-person narrator, Offred, describing the old gymnasium where she has been sleeping, and the sense of longing and loss in the atmosphere. The room feels layered with long-gone emotions of high school dances and romance. She and other women sleep on army-issue cots while Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth keep watch, carrying cattle prods.

The book's first image emphasizes the way that memory and old emotions sprout up through the strict new world order. But Offred won't answer all our questions right away, describing the scene without explaining.

Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth aren't allowed to have guns, the narrator explains. The guards outside, specialty members of a group called the Angels, have guns, but they aren't allowed to enter, just as the women aren't allowed to exit except for two walks per day.

Right away, Offred shows the importance of hierarchy and gender roles in this society. As bad as the Aunts are, there's something worse waiting outside.

Offred, like the other women, wishes that she could speak to the guards, longing for some "deal" with them that she could make with her body.

Offred's sole power is located in her body, which she knows the men will still respond to.

Though Offred and the other women aren't allowed to speak to each other, they manage to draw each other's attention and quietly whisper at night, when the Aunts aren't looking. They tell each other their names, including Janine and Moira.

The women assert their memories and their personhood by rebelling, in an act as simple as telling each other their names.

CHAPTER 2

Offred describes a different bedroom, with traditional, safe décor. Its distinguishing characteristic is a plastered-over hole in the ceiling, formerly for a chandelier, that reminds her of an empty eye socket. Offred remembers Aunt Lydia telling her to think of her life as being in the army. Offred notes that flowers are permitted, but the print of irises in her room has no glass, to prevent her from harming herself. If she tried to run away, she wouldn't get far. But she appreciates the sunlight and being alive.

Like the gym, Offred's room has a layer of strangeness over a structure of tradition and normalcy. Clearly someone has done their best to make sure that the room is rebel-proof, as safe as a prison but more attractive. But the authorities who planned it are invisible and mysterious, and Offred doesn't explain.

The bell rings to mark time, like in a nunnery, and Offred puts on her red uniform, including shoes, gloves, and a long modest dress. She wears white wings around her face "to keep us from seeing but also from being seen."

The comparison to a nunnery is both fitting, since Offred must live a silent, spare lifestyle based on religious principles, and wrong, since she's a sex worker.

Offred walks through the house, a stately, traditional home with many restrictions. She's not allowed to sit in the sitting room, and she sneaks a peak in the round mirror in the hallway. Offred takes her red umbrella and enters the kitchen, where Rita, a Martha dressed in green, is kneading bread. Rita does not approve of Offred's position or red clothing.

This scene highlights a major issue: the disunity and anger between different women. Rita and Offred are both victims of the same anti-women regime, but their internal divisions mean that they won't band together and threaten Gilead.

Offred recalls a conversation she heard between Rita and Cora, when Rita said that she would have preferred to go to the Colonies and suffer than to have a position like Offred's. Cora says she might have been a Handmaid, if she was younger and hadn't had a sterilizing operation.

Though the new government has done its best to religiously justify the adultery of the kind Handmaids perform, Rita won't give up her strong attitudes from earlier days.

Despite Rita's unfriendliness, Offred wishes that she could stay, talk and gossip like in the old times. Sometimes the women tell rumors of violence in other households. Offred wishes she could touch the bread, which reminds her of a body. Offred remembers Luke teaching her the word "fraternize."

The women's gossiping is a form of rebellion, showing that the need to tell stories and connect socially is a strong human urge that not even Gilead's threats can subdue.

Rita gives Offred the tokens for food, with images of food on them. Rita tells Offred to tell the shops her Commander's name to get fresh goods. Offred doesn't smile at Rita, as she doesn't see the point of trying to make friends.

Yet despite Offred's interest in sociability and gossiping, she's unwilling to be bold and change her situation, from fear or maybe from passivity and inertia.

CHAPTER 3

Offred walks through the garden on the way to the shops. The red tulips have bloomed and look, to Offred, as though they've been cut and are healing. The Commander's Wife, Serena Joy, takes care of the garden, with the aid of a Guardian (Nick). Serena Joy, who has arthritis in her left foot, also passes time sewing and knitting elaborate, childish scarves for the Angels at war. Offred imagines that maybe the scarves aren't actually used, but just unwoven into yarn again.

Serena Joy spends her time with two traditionally feminine hobbies that are related to fertility. The garden's rampant blooming stands in contrast to the sterile world of Gilead, and the tulips' color links them to Offred. The childish scarves show Serena Joy's desire to create and protect.

Offred recalls five weeks ago, when she arrived at the house. In her flashback, Serena Joy herself, identifiable by her blue Commander's Wife robes, opens the door. Offred remembers Aunt Lydia's advice to be empathetic. Serena Joy smokes an illegal cigarette. They talk, and we learn that this is Offred's third assignment to a Commander. Serena Joy says that they should interact as little as possible, and that this is strictly business, which disappoints Offred, who longs for a closer familial connection. Offred's quiet, obedient answers remind herself of a talking doll.

Offred filters her first encounter with Serena Joy through an additional layer of memory, which shows that she finds the scene important enough to dwell on. Serena Joy comes off as a hypocrite, both firmly upholding the Gilead law that the Handmaid and Wife should be separate, and rebelling by smoking a cigarette.

Still in the flashback to five weeks ago, Offred remembers why Serena Joy looks familiar: from a religious television program called the Growing Souls Gospel hour, where Serena Joy was an emotional, beautiful singer.

Strangely, in light of her rebellious cigarette, we learn that Serena Joy made religion her life even before Gilead.

CHAPTER 4

Out of the flashback, Offred continues on her shopping trip. The path through the garden looks like a part in hair, and the worms remind Offred of fertility. The Guardian assigned to the Commander, Nick, polishes the Commander's fancy Whirlwind car. Nick demonstrates a touch of irreverence by rolling up his uniform sleeves and smoking a black-market cigarette. He lives above the garage, but wasn't given a woman, which shows his low rank.

Offred constantly sees signs of rebellion and of fertility, the two things most on her mind. Offred is clearly well trained in Gilead's laws, since she even knows a Guardian's uniform rules. Yet the more aware one is of Gilead's rules, the more one notices how many people break them.

Nick winks at Offred, which alarms her. She doesn't understand the gesture, which is a risky move that she could report to the authorities, and fears he might be an Eye.

Gilead has successfully created an atmosphere of paranoia and fear so powerful that Offred polices herself.

Offred waits at the corner, recalling Aunt Lydia's advice to be patient and to imagine herself as a seed. She remembers children's ballet classes, pretending to be a tree. Another red-clad handmaid, Ofglen, approaches, and they greet each other, saying, "Blessed be the fruit," and "May the Lord open." Offred knows that they're together not for their own safety, but to spy on each other, and she thinks Ofglen might be a truly faithful Handmaid.

This moment also shows the extent to which Gilead has infiltrated Offred's mind. Everything reminds her of Aunt Lydia, a sign of successful brainwashing. And rather than trust, people operate on a basis of suspicion, making connections difficult.

As the pair walks, Ofglen mentions how some rebel Baptists have been captured. The road is barricaded and heavily guarded, and the women must show passes to two green-clad Guardians of the Faith. The Guardians aren't soldiers like the Angels, but take care of general policing and other lower-status tasks. Last week, the Guardians at a barricade shot a Martha, according to Cora and Rita's gossip.

Little by little, Gilead's rigidity is clarified. Not all Christians are seen as being good in Gilead, though we never learn exactly what sects Gilead approves of. Despite everyone's casual rule-breaking, Offred's paranoia seems justified because of the government's casual attitude towards murder.

The Guardians show respect to the Handmaids by saluting them. One of the Guardians looks around Offred's wings at her face, a rebellious act that makes Offred imagine coming back to him secretly at night. Offred imagines that maybe he thinks about the same thing. Offred thinks about the secretive black vans of the Eyes, which can go through the barricades without pause. Ultimately, Offred decides that the Guardians probably think about nothing more than duty, promotion, and marriage.

As she did at the Rachel and Leah Center, Offred fantasizes about tempting the male guards with her body. She doesn't imagine her own gratification, though—instead, she imagines having power, and making the men transgress. But Offred thinks that she's the only one with such rebellious thoughts.

Still, after passing the barricade Offred walks away in a seductive manner, enjoying her slight sense of power, and hoping that she's aroused the men so much that they'll suffer at night.

Offred has no empathy, and doesn't want to rebel as part of a team effort to overthrow Gilead. Instead, she wants to inflict pain.

CHAPTER 5

Offred and Ofglen continue on their shopping walk, passing beautifully maintained but childless neighborhoods in the center of the Republic of Gilead, an area formerly occupied by the professors of the now closed Harvard University. Offred remembers walking here with Luke, dreaming about having children and buying a big house.

As in the gym scene at the book's beginning, Offred compares the present with the romantic past. Notably, both the first scene and this one take place at repurposed schools (a high school, and Harvard), suggesting how Gilead does not value such education.

Offred remembers the time before women were protected, both the constant precautions she had to take with men, and the freedom to choose her own clothes and spend money. She remembers Aunt Lydia defining the current situation as "Freedom from," instead of "Freedom to."

This is the first of many instances where Offred acknowledges that the past is not perfect, and that Gilead has, from a certain point of view, made improvements.

Offred and Ofglen pass the clothing store called Lilies of the Field, which has an image instead of a sign, because reading is illegal for women. They go to the similarly image-labeled grocery store Milk and Honey, which today has rare oranges in stock. A pregnant Handmaid comes in, and the other Handmaids are excited and jealous. The pregnant Handmaid seems to be showing off. Offred thinks her belly resembles a fruit. Offred realizes that the pregnant woman is Janine, whom she knew in the Red Center (also called the Rachel and Leah Center).

That the Biblical name of the grocery store ("Milk and Honey" comes from a description of Israel's wonderful fertility, in Exodus), as well as the fact that women aren't allowed to read, further illuminate Gilead's two prime interests: suppressing women, and basing the new laws on the Bible.

Offred and Ofglen go to the meat store, called All Flesh. Offred gets a chicken wrapped in paper. Plastic bags are rare now but she remembers when they were abundant. She remembers Luke telling her to be careful about storing them, for their daughter's protection.

This passage shows the stream-of-consciousness ease with which Offred slips into memories. She seems to live half in Gilead, and half in the past. Only in memory does she have any sort of freedom.

A group of possibly Japanese tourists approaches on the street. Offred stares at the women's knee-length skirts and high heels, thinking that the shoes look like torture devices. The women also have bare hair and red lipstick. Offred and Ofglen are interested but disgusted, and Offred realizes her ideas about this kind of clothing have changed very quickly.

Offred has an important moment of self-awareness when she understands that she used to dress like the women she now finds repulsive. She understands how successfully Gilead has molded her mind, though she can't overthrow her new opinions.

The interpreter, with a winged eye pin, asks if the tourists can take pictures of Offred and Ofglen. Offred denies the request, remembering that Aunt Lydia told the Handmaids to be invisible. Offred suspects that the tour guide might be an Eye. The tourists want to know if the Handmaids are happy, and Offred says yes.

Just like Offred's confused reaction to Nick's seemingly friendly wink, we see Gilead's power to make Offred so afraid and paranoid that she follows all the laws.

CHAPTER 6

As Offred and Ofglen return from their shopping trip, Ofglen asks to go by the church. Offred agrees, knowing that the motivation for going by the church isn't actually religious. As they walk, Offred looks at the view in little bursts, restrained from full sight by the wings around her face. She remembers the former uses of her surroundings, the river, boathouse and student dormitories of the now defunct Harvard University. The football stadium is now used for Men's Salvagings. Offred thinks about how people only want to remember the beautiful parts of the past.

Though Offred understands that people only want to remember good things, we will see that she also can't help remembering bad things. Contradictorily, though her memories seem to be her last area of liberty, she is also plagued by involuntary memories of terrible events, all related to Gilead. Gilead has taken her present and her past.

Offred and Ofglen look at the small old church and graveyard. Ofglen seems to pray, and Offred can't tell if it's an act.

Offred's an equal opportunity skeptic, suspecting people of being Eyes or rebels.

Offred and Ofglen go to look at the real source of their interest, the red-brick Wall. Once the border of Harvard's campus, now it's barricaded and guarded like a prison wall, to keep the people inside from coming out. Six dead men hang along the wall, from the Men's Salvaging. The faces are covered with white bags, which disturb Offred, reminding her of scarecrows, dolls, zeros or snowmen. One bag has red blood where the mouth would be underneath, which looks like a child's drawing of a mouth.

For the first time, we see the violence that underlies Gilead's government. Offred's vivid imagination even links the dead men to children's drawings, combining the themes of theocracy, fertility, and rebellion in one image. The government both eliminates life and hopes to create it.

The dead men wear white coats like doctors, and have signs around their necks indicating the reason for their execution: fetuses. They must have provided abortions before the Republic of Gilead, and some informant must have ratted them out to the government. Offred feels nothing for the men, but she's glad they aren't Luke.

Offred's surprising callousness comes through again in this scene, like it did when she tried to tempt the checkpoint guards. She is immune to strangers' suffering or a desire to support rebels.

Offred looks at the bloody red smile on the bag again. The red reminds her of Serena Joy's tulips, but she reminds herself that this is a coincidence, and that the blood and flowers are distinct phenomena, equally but separately valid.

This passage shows how Offred confuses memories and subjective impressions with reality. Superficial similarities (like the color red) seem to reveal deep truths.

Ofglen seems to be crying beside Offred. Offred isn't sure if this is genuine emotion or just for show, and she doesn't know what good such a show could do. She remembers Aunt Lydia saying that they will get used to Gilead and it will become ordinary.

Offred returns to worrying about one of her constant concerns. How can she distinguish between a true believer and a cautious faker?

CHAPTER 7

Offred lies in bed, thinking about the difference between the active word *lie* and the passive word *lay*, and the latter's sexual connotations. She lies under the plastered-over eye in the ceiling, deciding on a memory to explore now that she has her private free time in the night.

The distinction between active and passive is relevant both to Offred's gender (she's always supposed to be passive) and her memories (where she can make her own decisions).

She remembers Moira in the time before Gilead, wearing overalls, an earring, one gold fingernail, and smoking. Moira wants to go get a beer, but Offred is working on a paper. Moira just wrote a paper on date rape, which Offred thinks sounds like a dessert.

Though Offred spent a lot of time around radical feminists before Gilead, here we learn that she never took their concerns too seriously. She was always a bit passive.

Offred switches to another memory, an older one. She remembers being in a cold park with her mother, going to feed the ducks. But instead of actually feeding the ducks, Offred is sulky to learn that they're there to burn books. Mostly women and some men burn books and magazines, and they hand one to Offred to burn. The cover shows that it's bondage porn, which Offred is too young to understand or object to.

Here we see a possible root of Offred's suspicions about radical feminists: they advocated censorship and destruction of reading materials, which parallels Gilead's actions. The passage shows that even feminists aren't perfect or blameless.

Offred can't remember what happens next in her memories. She remembers a different time, when she must have been drugged to help her get over a confusing shock. She remembers waking up and trying to find out where her daughter has been taken. The authorities say she is with a better fitting family, and show Offred a picture of her angelic-looking daughter with another woman.

Though Offred had active control over her previous two memories, now a bad moment from her past rears up without her control. Gilead has even taken away her ability to remember what she wants.

Offred wishes that she could believe that "this is a story I'm telling," because then she would be able to pick the ending and go back to her previous life. She affirms that she's not making it up, but it is indeed a story, and she's not writing it but telling it to someone, even if she doesn't know whom. She imagines all the *you*s she could be talking to, and pretends someone can hear her.

This passage powerfully illustrates Offred's mixed feelings about remembering and storytelling. She knows that these acts are basically useless, but she also knows they give her a bit of hope, comfort and freedom.

CHAPTER 8

The weather stays good, reminding Offred of the old days of dresses and ice cream. Back at the Wall there are three new bodies, a priest and two men hanged for Gender Treachery: homosexual activity. Offred is always the first to suggest to Ofglen that they should leave. Offred still can't tell what Ofglen's attitude towards the bodies is, but she resents her.

The executions for "gender treachery" show that Gilead forces men, as well as women, to conform to certain ideas of gender norms. The dead priest highlights the pickiness of Gilead's biblical interpretations.

As they walk away, Ofglen comments on the beautiful May day. Offred remembers how Mayday used to be used in war for pilots to signal distress. Luke once told her the word's origins, from French, meaning "help me." The women see a small funeral procession on the street, three Econowives with black veils, one carrying a jar of her dead fetus. Offred feels sympathetic pain, but the Econowives gesture rudely, disliking Handmaids. Offred and Ofglen part with the official goodbye, "Under His Eye." Ofglen seems to want to say something else, but doesn't.

Offred doesn't realize that "Mayday" stands for resistance. This is the first of many occasions when Offred's memories and love distract her from participating in the Resistance. Instead of trying to figure out what Ofglen is attempting to signal, Offred acts typically—she feels something for the mourning Econowife, but doesn't attempt a real connection.

At Offred's house, Nick polishes the Commander's Whirlwind. The red tulips look like empty chalices, and Offred doesn't understand what they are striving for. Nick whistles and asks Offred how her walk was, but she doesn't speak, remembering Aunt Lydia's advice.

In Offred's response to the tulips, we get a view into her thoughts. She doesn't see the point of attempting to bloom, or the point of attempting to connect with Nick.

Offred sees Serena Joy sitting in the garden, and thinks that her name sounds stupid, like a hair product. Serena Joy chose her name; her given name was Pam. Offred remembers seeing Serena Joy giving speeches about how a woman's place is in the home, although Serena Joy herself was not just a housewife. She wore a lot of makeup and cried dramatically. During that time, there were two attempts on her life, and though Luke found her emotional persona funny, Offred was scared. Offred imagines that Serena Joy must be angry now that she can't give speeches and has ended up stuck in the home after all.

Despite Offred's detached behavior, her thoughts are angry and rebellious. The story of Serena Joy demonstrates the rigidity of Gilead. Even a woman who grew famous for her staunch support of gender divisions and religion is not allowed to have any power in the new theocracy. This scene is also the first hint that Luke and Offred might not have been the perfect pair that Offred likes to imagine.

Offred looks at Serena Joy's sunken profile as she passes. Her face reminds Offred of fallen towns. Offred recalls Aunt Lydia saying that the Wives of the Commanders will hate the Handmaids, and that the Handmaids should be empathetic. Offred remembers Aunt Lydia's happy and devout expression as she lectured the Handmaids. Aunt Lydia looked like God was appearing to her on a cloud of powder makeup.

Offred's constant recollections of Aunt Lydia show another way that Gilead has dominated her memories. The scene also shows how Gilead cleverly caused divisions that make women hate each other. Then, Aunt Lydia's urgings for sympathy make her seem religious and fair.

Offred enters the kitchen, where the smell of bread reminds her of the past and mothers, though her mother didn't bake. She tries to block the "treacherous" scent. Rita cuts carrots, and Offred desires the knife. Rita, as usual, seems displeased with the groceries, and Offred mentions the oranges at Milk and Honey, to no reaction. Rita pokes at the headless chicken. Cora enters, and she and Rita discuss who will take care of Offred's bath.

Though Offred shows her violently rebellious side by longing for the knife, in the scene she's paralleled with the chicken. Like the chicken, she's a passive body and a household chore that the Marthas must take care of.

Offred goes upstairs, pausing to enjoy the light through the stained glass. The convex mirror looks like an eye to her. The Commander is standing outside her room, which he's never done before. He walks away when she arrives, and she tries to interpret his gesture. She realizes that she thinks of the room as hers.

Like Ofglen previously in the chapter, the Commander seems to want to communicate something. But Offred worries more about his meaning than she did about Ofglen's, showing how Offred worries most about what might personally affect her.

CHAPTER 9

As Offred waits in her room, she thinks about the household's previous Handmaid. When she first arrived, she began her slow examination of every nook and cranny in the room, and found evidence of its previous resident. Offred gets sidetracked into another memory: she remembers looking hastily through hotel rooms, when she used to meet up with Luke when he was still married to his first wife. She remembers her nervousness and confusion about his feelings and about the affair. She didn't appreciate the happiness she had. She misses the carelessness and independence of staying in hotels.

This memory shows how Offred fuses love, freedom, and carelessness in her mind. She longs for the past, but she also realizes that her new perspective allows her a greater appreciation for what she previously took for granted. Gilead has shrunk down the range of experiences she can have, but it has made her extremely attentive to detail and nuance.

Offred returns to her main memory of examining her bedroom when she arrived at the house. She explored every tiny detail, including mattress stains that suggested old lovers, and felt faint, thinking of Luke. On the third day after her arrival, she looked at the cupboard, where there were still hooks, allowing the potential of self-harm. In the darkest corner, someone wrote "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum."

Offred's swooning memory of Luke demonstrates how she is still able to feel the emotions of the past even in the present that tries to suppress them. As well as thoughts of love, rebellion takes up a large part of her attention—the hooks immediately signify suicide.

Though Offred doesn't know the meaning of the phrase, suspecting it might be Latin, she is happy imagining the previous Handmaid who sent her the message, and happy to have received it. She thinks of Moira's energy and freckles, and imagines that the previous Handmaid must have had freckles too. Offred flashes back to another memory, when she asked Rita about the previous Handmaid, and pretended to know her, mentioning her freckles. Rita refused to explain why that Handmaid left.

Even without understanding the Latin, Offred's act of reading is rebellion, since women are forbidden to read. Offred's active imagination melds together Moira to the previous Handmaid. Though Rita won't be her friend, Offred can communicate with and love her own imaginary friends.

CHAPTER 10

Offred sometimes sings herself "Amazing Grace," a song now banned for the word "free." She also sings a song about loneliness that she remembers from her mother's cassettes. The only other music in the house is Rita's occasional humming, or Serena Joy illegally listening to recordings of her young self singing religious songs.

"Amazing Grace" is a religious song that also was an important slave spiritual before the American Civil War. The song links Gilead to the Confederacy, and highlights how the Bible can be interpreted both for freedom and for slavery.

It's hot and soon Offred will wear her cotton summer dresses. She remembers Aunt Lydia disdaining the scantily-clad women of the past, who she said looked like cooking meat. Aunt Lydia thought that such women brought certain *things* upon themselves. In a memory of Offred's from the Rachel and Leah Center, as Aunt Lydia began to explain something about men and women lying out in public, she began to cry. Aunt Lydia said she was trying to do her best for the Handmaids, and that it was not easy.

As in Chapter 8, we see how Aunt Lydia cunningly acts like she's on the side of good. She puts on a calculated show of caring, even while she indoctrinates the Handmaids to Gilead's rules. Still, the passage shows that Gilead has improved some things, like eliminating sexual harassment.

Offred retreats into another memory, of Moira. In the memory, Moira is planning an "underwhore" party to sell sexy lingerie. Moira makes a joke about how women feel the need to compete with porn, and Offred laughs. Back in the present day, Offred muses about how she and others ignored the gradual changes that lead to Gilead, including the discoveries of the beaten corpses of women. She thinks that it's easy to ignore bad things when they happen to other people.

Moira's party is a feminist attempt to take control of female sexuality. But Offred's previous memory of Aunt Lydia throws Moira's actions into doubt. Is the "Underwhore" party really a promotion of women's rights, or does it feed right into the culture of porn and men's gratification?

Offred sits at the window seat, which has a cushion that says "faith" on it (though it's illegal for her to read). Veiling her face with the curtain, she sees the Commander go out to his car, with Nick standing by. She imagines throwing something out the window at the Commander, then remembers dropping water-filled bags on boys with Moira in college. The Commander leaves, and Offred can't quite figure out her feeling towards him, which is neither hate nor love.

The faith cushion, just by having writing on it, forces Offred into a kind of passive rebellion. This memory of Moira further complicates Offred's attitudes towards feminism. Is Moira really teaching the boys anything, or is her bag-dropping simply flirtatious?

CHAPTER 11

Offred went to the doctor yesterday morning for her regular monthly checkup. She remembers the appointment in present tense. A Guardian with a red armband drives her to the appointment and waits outside. Offred shows her pass to the armed nurse. The examination room has a red screen with an eye painted on it. Offred takes off her clothes and lies on the table, with a sheet blocking the doctor's view of her face. The doctor is more talkative than necessary and calls her honey while examining her, testing her breasts like fruit, and proclaiming her healthy.

Like the scene with Rita poking the chicken, or Offred's symbolic connection with the tulips, this scene shows how Offred is a passive, interchangeable object. Now her body is like a fruit, another fertility symbol. Yet the doctor's flirtatious "honey" bothers Offred—she'd prefer to be as impersonally treated as possible.

The doctor gets close to the sheet, offering to help Offred. At first she thinks he might help her find Luke. Then he lifts the sheet, though his face is partly obscured by a medical mask, and touches her sexually. He says that many Commanders are sterile, a taboo word that shocks Offred, since only women, according to the law, might have reproductive difficulties. He says many Handmaids have taken such steps, and that it's the right time of the month for Offred.

Offred's quick, improbable hope about Luke shows how love, rather than sex or self-preservation, is honestly her first priority. The doctor's offer doesn't come off as a purely helpful act of resistance. He touches Offred without her permission, in a throwback to pre-Gilead harassment.

The doctor is sympathetic but also enjoying the situation. Offred thinks it's too dangerous, frightened that it might be a trap. She could get killed for having sex with him, but she could also get killed for not being able to have a baby with the Commander. Though Offred turns the doctor down, she tries to act open, knowing that he has the power to say that she's sick and have her sent to the Colonies with the Unwomen. Though she's committed no crime, she realizes that she's most afraid of the opportunity to change her life.

Though the doctor's offer seems to represent a tantalizing opportunity to improve her situation, Offred is paralyzed by uncertainty and risk. She'd rather follow Gilead's laws than try to improve her life, which demonstrates that Gilead, despite all its horrors, is tolerable and even reassuring to Offred.

CHAPTER 12.

Back in the present day, Offred takes her bath. The bath has no mirror, razors, lock, or other items that could allow the possibility of suicide. Cora ran the bath and now sits outside. Offred remembers Aunt Lydia saying the bath is a vulnerable spot, and Aunt Lydia explaining the Biblical precedent for women having long hair. Offred enjoys taking off her habit and wings and feeling her own hair. Offred remembers Moira's disdain for pantyhose.

The bath shows the difficulty of quashing rebellion: despite the long list of banned, dangerous materials, Offred is allowed to sit alone in the bath, where she could drown. As much as Offred fantasizes about escape, she's constrained by her own mind.

Offred feels strange to be naked, and wonderingly remembers wearing a swimsuit. She doesn't look at her body because it is "something that determines me so completely." The water feels like hands, holding her.

Offred tries to ignore how Gilead has reduced her to an object, a body. But her distaste for looking at herself reveals that she's internalized the Gileadean attitudes.

In a spontaneous flashback, Offred remembers her daughter as a baby. She remembers when a stranger tried to steal her eleven-month-old when she and Luke were at the supermarket. Luke was buying steak, which he thought men were proven to need more than women, affirming a real difference between the sexes. He liked to tease Offred's mother about such things. Offred heard her daughter crying and found that a stranger had taken her, saying God had told her it was hers. Luke dismissed the stranger as crazy.

As with Luke's nonchalant opinion of Serena Joy in Chapter 8, we see that Offred and Luke weren't always in exact agreement. Or perhaps before Gilead Offred agreed more with Luke (after all, Offred thought "date rape" sounded like a dessert), and only now, in memory, does she focus on his insensitivity.

Offred imagines her daughter as a ghost who died at age five. Offred laments the loss of her photos, clothes and baby hair. She remembers Aunt Lydia saying that if people should care more about spirituality than materiality. Offred wonders if her daughter remembers her, certain that the authorities must have told her daughter that her mother had died. Her daughter would be eight now. Offred thinks it's better to imagine her daughter as dead, which is less painful than hope.

Even Offred's love of her daughter has been tainted by Aunt Lydia's Gileadean values. Offred wants to think about objects, but Aunt Lydia comes in to scold her, and effectively reorganizes her thoughts. Even after the memory of Aunt Lydia retreats, the influence remains—Offred would rather be hopeless than feel like she could do anything.

Cora tells Offred to hurry up. Offred tries to make herself very clean, since her bath opportunities are limited. She looks at her tattoo on her ankle, with four numbers and an eye, which ensures she will always be identifiable. She dresses but doesn't put on the wings, since she's staying within the house.

The number tattoo links Gilead to the Holocaust. The eye suggests that even Offred's body is watching—a metaphor come true, since she paranoiacally self-polices herself at all times.

Cora brings Offred her dinner, and Offred is pleased that Cora bothers to knock at her door. Rita has overcooked the chicken to show her dislike of Offred. Aunt Lydia used to emphasize the importance of proper nourishment, to be "a worthy vessel." Offred is too nervous to eat, but chokes down the food because she has no place to hide it. She imagines the luxury and freedom of Serena Joy's dinner downstairs. Offred carefully saves a piece of butter, which she plans to use for something later.

Like the "chalice"-like tulips in Chapter 8, Offred sees herself as empty and waiting to receive. But the thing she needs to fill herself with clearly isn't food. Her hiding the butter is her first real active action against the rules, suggesting that maybe Offred isn't as passive as she seems.

CHAPTER 13

Offred thinks about how she has too much time, and wishes she could have a hobby like knitting. She remembers nineteenth century paintings of fat women in harems, with whose boredom she now sympathizes. She, too, is waiting for a man to put her to use. She sympathetically imagines a caged pig or lab rat.

Though Offred doesn't have sympathy for the hanged men in Chapter 6, here she has imaginative sympathy for people and animals who seem much more distant.

Offred lies on a rug, practicing pelvic exercising like Aunt Lydia advised. Offred remembers the naptime in the Rachel and Leah Center, thinking that it was training for later boredom. She and her fellow Handmaids slept, but she didn't know if they were truly tired, shocked, or on drugs.

Offred offers another possibility to explain Gilead's success, and (between the lines) her own hopeless yet accepting behavior: drugs. She never sees how her food is prepared, so it seems possible.

Offred remembers Moira's arrival at the Rachel and Leah Center, three weeks after her own. She and Moira tried not to be obvious about their friendship, but managed to schedule an appointment to talk in the bathroom. They plan to meet up at two thirty, during Testifying. Aunt Lydia and Aunt Helena lead the Handmaids to describe Janine's rape as her fault, and as God's will to teach her a lesson.

The Testifying scene shows where Aunt Lydia's encouragements to be sympathetic and to work together break down. Women turn against women in a dramatic scene of peer pressure and self-blaming.

Offred remembers the previous week, when Janine began crying during Testifying, and the others hated her and called her a crybaby. This week, Janine admits that it's all her fault. Offred carefully times her bathroom request, as she knows that sometimes the Handmaids are not permitted, pee on themselves, and are punished. Offred is allowed to go out. In one stall, there's a peephole through the wall to the women's bathroom, and she manages to make contact with Moira.

The punishment for a blameless, natural body function is in line with Gilead's will to blame women for their inability to have children, even when the men are the sterile ones. Though in later chapters the Commander will describe the scientific basis for Gilead, this scene shows its irrationality.

Back in the present time, Offred thinks about her body, her blood like red waves, and her failure to become pregnant. She imagines the first apartment she shared with Luke, all empty, with no suitable clothes. She remembers running through the woods with her daughter, whom she drugged to be quiet. Shots are fired behind her, so she drops and protects her daughter, momentarily fascinated by a beautiful red leaf. She loses consciousness, feeling her daughter pulling away. Cora and a bell wake her from her nightmare.

This scene offers another possibility to explain Offred's passivity—she did try to rebel once, and she lost everything she loved. Offred's memories of her past failure to protect her daughter and stick with Luke are linked (also with the color red) to her present failure to achieve Gilead's demands. Duty to Gilead and duty to loved ones are parallel in her mind.

CHAPTER 14

Offred goes downstairs, passing the eye-like mirror. She kneels in the sitting room. The room is luxuriously decorated in Serena Joy's mixed style of quality and sentimentality. Serena Joy's perfume, Lily of the Valley, smells like innocent girlishness, which makes Offred sick. Offred wishes she could steal something, to have a bit of power.

As with the childish scarves, Serena Joy's perfume reflects her profound longing for a baby, as well as the way that babylike things in Gilead are so rare that they are valuable and beautiful.

Cora, Rita and Nick enter. Nick touches his foot to Offred's. Nick touches again and Offred moves again, unsure of his intentions. Serena Joy arrives in a flower-trimmed dress, but Offred thinks that Serena Joy should accept that she's "withered" instead of bedecking herself with plants' reproductive organs.

Although Offred just wished she could rebel and have a bit of power, when Nick makes a possibly rebellious gesture, Offred doesn't participate. Nonetheless, she rebels against Serena Joy mentally.

The Commander is late, so Serena Joy turns on the TV news, which shows the Angels attacking the Baptists in the Appalachians. Offred isn't sure if the TV shows reality or if everyone's an actor. The TV then shows thousands of "Children of Ham" being transported to some kind of camp in North Dakota.

The battles against the Baptists that Ofglen alluded to in Chapter 4 continue. The television doesn't try to disguise the situation, instead showing Gilead in all its might.

Offred retreats into a memory, when she still had her old name. She imagines getting into a car with her daughter and Luke, pretending to be going to a picnic, but secretly planning to escape to Canada, with fake passports all prepared. Luke sings confidently, but Offred is petrified.

This memory demonstrates that, despite their differences, Luke and Offred complemented each other's personalities. Even before becoming a Handmaid, Offred tended to be scared.

CHAPTER 15

The gray-haired, neat Commander arrives, wearing a black suit. He unlocks the Bible from its box and sits down to read. Offred tries to imagine his point of view, scrutinized like this. She imagines his penis as a slug eye. She knows he's very powerful, and can't tell if his position is fine or hellish. The Commander reads biblical passages about fertility.

In our first real-time glimpse of the Commander, Offred pictures his sexuality as disgusting and crude. Her mental rebellions seem to help her cope with the pressure of the meeting, as she is the one who's supposed to bring fertility.

Offred has a flashback to the Rachel and Leah Center, and remembers listening to a tape recording of the Beatitudes at lunch, clearly an edited version, although Offred wasn't sure what had been omitted.

The edited biblical passages show that the government of Gilead isn't simply trying to interpret the Bible, but to twist it to suit their politicized goals and interpretations.

Offred remembers meeting up again with Moira in the bathroom. Moira planned to escape by pretending to be sick, and perhaps trying to seduce the ambulance drivers.

Offred, too, has fantasies about seducing men to gain power, but only Moira dared to try.

Back in the present time, the Commander finishes reading. Offred imagines the bible pages feeling powder-paper makeup. Serena Joy silently cries. As Offred prays "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum," she remembers seeing Moira carried to an ambulance for appendicitis at the Rachel and Leah Center. Right afterwards, Moira was dragged back into the Rachel and Leah Center and the staff severely tortured her feet. The other Handmaids stole sugar for her in a gesture of solidarity. Back in present time, the Commander dismisses the household.

Moira, like Offred in her way, is more interested in saving her own skin than organizing the other Handmaids into revolution. Moira's escape and capture may have led the other Handmaids into the small-scale rebellion of stealing, but on the whole, the severity of her punishment may have actually made the Handmaids more afraid.

CHAPTER 16

Offred lies on her back on Serena Joy's canopy bed, clothed except for her underpants. The bed's draperies look like ship's sails, pregnant with air. Offred lies between Serena Joy's (clothed) legs, and they hold hands. The Commander has sex with Offred's lower body, in an impersonal, disjointed style, which Offred doesn't call rape because she chose to be a Handmaid. The atmosphere is serious, as arousal, love, and kissing are unnecessary. Offred remembers her previous Commander, who smelled worse.

This scene is the meat of what being a Handmaid is all about—being a body, a receptacle for sex. Maybe unexpectedly, Offred doesn't picture Luke or love, but remains emotionally removed, simply glad the current Commander doesn't have a bad odor. In the moment when her imagination could have served her, she prefers seriousness.

After coming, the Commander leaves quickly and politely, which Offred finds somehow funny. Serena Joy makes Offred leave immediately, although she's supposed to lie down for ten minutes to increase the chances of conception.

Serena Joy's action shows that, for now, woman-on-woman hatred outweighs her desire to have a baby at all costs.

CHAPTER 17

Offred returns to her bedroom and finds her pat of butter half-melted in her shoe. She rubs the butter into her face as moisturizer, since she isn't permitted any makeup of lotion, for the sake of the Wives. Offred learned about the butter at the Rachel and Leah Center, which she explains was also called the Red Center.

When Offred finally does complete her rebellious action, it's just for her own comfort (and maybe beauty). Sadly, her Red Center peers didn't manage to impart any more meaningful schemes.

Offred lies in bed, imagining the plastered eye in her ceiling staring at her. She looks at the moon and profoundly misses Luke, and decides to steal something.

Offred's love for Luke gives her the emotional capacity to take a more decisive action.

Offred carefully walks downstairs and resolves to steal a daffodil. She hears Nick's footsteps. They're both breaking the rules. They touch each other. Offred longs to do more, thinking of Nick as Luke in another body, but she's afraid. Nick says he was coming to tell Offred to go see the Commander tomorrow.

Though Offred's thoughts of Luke may have brought about her rebellious moment, she immediately begins acting sexually with Nick. As with the blood and tulips in Chapter 6, separate entities seem to merge.

CHAPTER 18

Offred lies in bed, disturbed and aroused by her encounter with Nick. She remembers spending time with Luke when she was pregnant. She feels too dead to masturbate.

Offred prefers to remember than to take action, even when she's by herself.

Offred believes in several different fates for Luke. First she imagines Luke as a corpse lying in the forest, and hopes he had a quick death from a bullet. Then she imagines him alive in prison, worn down and old-looking, with a gash as red as tulips on his face. Finally she imagines him safely over the border, making contact with a Resistance movement. She imagines that Luke might find a way to send her a message and rescue her and their daughter. Offred keeps believes in all three possibilities for Luke at once, or else she feels that she can't believe in anything.

Though Offred has previously said that she prefers not to hope (for example, in Chapter 12, when she thinks about her daughter), this passage shows her being both hopeful and maybe willfully blind. She misses out on one big possibility—maybe Luke is now working for Gilead. But Offred would prefer to idealize Luke, and maintain her love for him as a form of escapism.

CHAPTER 19

Offred dreams first that she has seen and picked up her daughter, and then that her mother has come to take care of her. When she truly wakes up, she wonders if she's been drugged. She sits on the Faith cushion and slowly eats breakfast, noting that her eggcup looks like a skirt, and taking pleasure in the beautiful egg.

After the night's surprising moment of connection with Nick, Offred dreams of other connections with loved ones. The egg wearing a skirt is an amusing reminder of the household's hopes for, and the way it views, Offred.

A red van, a Birthmobile, comes to the house to pick up Offred. A Guardian drives her and several other Handmaids to Ofwarren's (Janine's) house for her birth. One of the other handmaids cries with joy. The Handmaids are allowed more freedom than usual in their behavior on birth days.

Gilead's laws are less strict towards Handmaids on Birth Days, which demonstrates Gilead's canny balancing of restriction and release, to ensure that Handmaid life is tolerable.

Offred knows that the chance of a healthy, living, normal-bodied baby is just one in four, because of many different problems that lead to sterility: radiation and pollution, atomic power plant mishaps, pesticides, syphilis, birth control pills, and women having their tubes tied. Offred remembers Aunt Lydia scorning the women who sterilized themselves and calling them Jezebels.

The blights that led to Gilead's fertility issues relate both to environmental issues and issues relating to the sexual liberation of the 1960's. Unsurprisingly, women get the blame for trying to control the results of their sexual activity.

Offred goes deeper into her flashback from the Rachel and Leah Center. She remembers Aunt Lydia explaining that some women self-sterilized because they thought the world was ending. Offred's school desk had love messages carved into it, but none after the mid-eighties, when schools were closing because there weren't enough children. As Aunt Lydia talks about the Handmaids' importance, Offred wants to kill her.

Offred's rage at Aunt Lydia about these issues could have several sources. Offred may be particularly upset that Aunt Lydia is criticizing women for trying to be responsible. Or perhaps Offred regrets the loss of freedom and love that the desk carvings represent.

Back in the present day, the Birthmobile arrives at Ofwarren's house, and we learn that Ofwarren is Janine, whom Offred disdains and thinks of as a "whiny bitch." Women must give birth without painkillers or medical intervention because that's what's in the bible.

Throughout the book, we'll see Offred's shocking lack of sympathy for Janine. Janine isn't even necessarily a true believer, but she's weak-willed, and Offred finds that even more deplorable.

Offred imagines how the Wives talk about the Handmaids. One might say that a Handmaid is like a daughter to her, but the others talk about the Handmaids as pesky animals or objects who are not to be trusted.

Though Offred dislikes the Wives for disdaining the Handmaids, Offred holds similar opinions towards Janine.

CHAPTER 20

Offred sees the fancy birth day buffet laid out for the Wives, including wine and oranges. The gray-haired Wife of Warren lies on the floor as though she's about to give birth as well. Janine lies on the master bedroom's large bed, pushing hard, and Offred feels a little more sympathy for her. Aunt Elizabeth stands by to help, and the Handmaids sit on the floor. Offred remembers more biblical justification for Handmaids, and Aunt Lydia saying that all this would be easier for future generations, who won't have unrealistic desires.

Aunt Lydia's point about how the future generations would find this easier seems unlikely, given the clear inequality between the Handmaids and the Wives. While the Wives get to enjoy themselves and make believe, the Handmaids must suffer. Yet Offred remembers Aunt Lydia's point without questioning it, showing how she has learned her role.

Offred has another flashback to the Rachel and Leah Center. She remembers the weekly movie time, which reminded her of watching films in high school. She thinks of the camera lens, as seen by primitive populations, as a "glass eye." But instead of anthropological movies, Aunt Lydia shows sadistic porn and even a movie of a woman being killed. She also shows movies of Unwomen, feminists in this context, but without volume so the Handmaids can't hear their ideas.

This scene echoes the feminist bondage-porn burnings in Chapter 7. In an ironic twist, Gilead shows the Handmaids what the feminists wanted to censor, as well as censoring what the feminists wanted to propose. At least on the issue of torture porn, Gilead and Offred's mother are unified.

In one film of the Unwomen that Aunt Lydia shows at the Rachel and Leah Center, Offred sees her mother at a feminist rally. Offred has a further flashback, to her mother talking about her decision to have a baby. She had Offred at age 37, and her feminist friends and her doctors criticized her for being too old.

Offred's mother's desire to have a baby shows another similarity between her values and Gilead's. The disapproval of Offred's mother's feminist friends demonstrates how feminists can also be closed-minded.

Offred remembers how her lively mother would come over to dinner with her and Luke and criticize their lives. Offred's mother criticized Offred's absentee father, who she found perfectly nice but distracted and frivolous. Luke played the devil's advocate, playfully fighting with Offred's mother. But it wasn't all joking: Offred's mother talked about how young people didn't understand the sacrifices of earlier feminists, and cried about how lonely she'd been.

Offred's mother's tears echo Aunt Lydia's tears in Chapter 10. Both women were ideological leaders, hoping to draw other women to their cause, while also feeling the difficulties of being a frontrunner of a bold new movement.

Offred feels that her mother put a burden on her to justify her mother's choices and existence. But although they had a rocky relationship, in the present day Offred only longs to have everything just like it was.

Offred herself wasn't such a feminist as her mother or Moira, showing both independence and a distaste for being controversial.

CHAPTER 21

Back at Janine's birth room, there's a stuffy, bloody, animalistic smell. The Handmaids chant breathing instructions. They pass cups of grape juice to each other and manage to whisper to each other as they do so. Offred asks the Handmaid next to her if she knows Moira, but she doesn't. Offred, too, feels pain like she's about to give birth, as Aunt Elizabeth taught the Handmaids to do.

For once, Offred doesn't fret so much about a small act of rebellion, and asks after Moira without worrying that the other Handmaid might be an Eye. This demonstrates the rare feeling of freedom and community on birth days.

Janine walks around distractedly, and poops in a portable toilet in the middle of the room. Offred knows this is her second baby. Their juice had alcohol in it, which the Wives will pretend not to notice. Janine starts to scream and Aunt Elizabeth prepares the two-seat birthing stool. The Wife of Warren comes in and sits on the upper seat, apparently conscious of the Handmaid's hostility towards her.

Despite all the pleasant symbols of fruits and flowers, the actual scene of birth is crude, intimate, and risky. The Handmaid system seems to break down into ridiculousness. It's clear who's doing the work, and who's faking, and yet Gilead attempts to deny the reality of the situation, to create a ceremony that allows the Wives to assert an emotional bond with the baby while the Handmaid is treated as just a body.

The Handmaids feel as though they are one with Janine as the baby comes out. The baby, a girl, seems to be healthy and normal, and the Handmaids smile as one. Offred remembers her and Luke's joy when she gave birth to her daughter.

For the first time, Offred willingly and effortlessly enters into exactly the state of mind that Gilead wants her to. The joy and community of the moment make Gilead seem temporarily utopian.

Warren's Wife lies on the bed holding the baby, and the other Wives crowd enviously around. Warren's Wife names the baby Angela. Meanwhile, the Handmaids block Janine's view of the bed, as Janine cries. After a few months of nursing she'll change households, and for her good work she won't be called an Unwoman and brought to the Colonies.

The spell quickly breaks as Gilead's hierarchies return. Janine won't be able to love her baby, but will be shuffled along to more duty. The scene demonstrates how society, not biology, determines family and reverence.

The Birthmobile brings the Handmaids back home. Offred feels fake milk in her breasts. Offred ponders her own lack of success. She thinks of her mother, who "wanted a women's culture," which has in a way been achieved.

This short but important passage again melds feminism and Gilead, and shows that neither is purely good or evil.

CHAPTER 22

After the Birth, Offred goes to her room, exhausted. Today the plaster wreath around the plaster eye in her ceiling looks like a hat with a garland of flowers and fruits. She briefly thinks of the kind of exhaustion that occurs after driving all night, then forces herself into a happier memory.

Though Offred tends to hate Janine, her body sympathizes with Janine's post-partum exhaustion, suggesting that their common gender and position may override their differences.

Offred flashbacks to Moira's great escape from the Rachel and Leah Center. (This escape was Moira's second attempt, after the failed first, when she faked appendicitis.) Offred knows the story indirectly, on a chain that originated with Aunt Lydia telling Janine. Offred imagines how Aunt Lydia would have told Janine the story, thinking that Janine had become a true believer. Offred, however, thinks that Janine wasn't a true believer, merely so abused that she would do anything for anyone.

Though Offred tends to worry about who's a true believer or an Eye and who's a faker, she seems to have confidence in her assessment of Janine, suggesting that Offred may see some of her own passivity and obedience reflected in Janine. Offred's passionate hatred of Janine suggests as much, as it may be an expression of a kind of self-hatred for her own passivity.

Moira had managed to block a toilet, and called Aunt Elizabeth to see what was the matter. When Aunt Elizabeth came into the bathroom and knelt to fix the toilet, Moira threatened her with a metal spike from the toilet's flushing mechanism. Moira took Aunt Elizabeth's cattle prod and whistle and hurried her into the furnace room. Aunt Elizabeth was afraid for her life and didn't scream. Moira took Aunt Elizabeth's clothes, gagged and bound Aunt Elizabeth, and managed to escape the Center without scrutiny from the guards.

Offred takes time to remember the details of the story, which evidently give her great pleasure. At the same time, though thoughts of Moira's rebellion may help Offred cope with her current situation, they might also make Offred more docile, allowing her to live in her own memories rather than rebel in real life.

Offred imagines that Aunt Lydia told Janine to find out if Moira had an accomplice. Janine told one other Handmaid and the story spread. The Handmaids found the story frightening as they were getting used to the confinement of the Rachel and Leah Center. Still, Moira's ability to disappear was a secret source of strength for the Handmaids. Moira never reappeared.

Despite the possibility that Moira's rebellion may have had the counterintuitive effect of keeping the other Handmaids docile, this passage illustrates the importance of storytelling, communication and hope.

CHAPTER 23

Back in the present time, Offred muses about how all of her memories are "reconstructions." If she ever manages to escape and tell her story, that too will be a reconstruction, even further separated from the original events. Offred thinks about the impossibility of remembering and telling anything perfectly. She thinks that maybe her biggest concern isn't who has control, but who can do terrible things and still be forgiven for them. At the end of all these thoughts, Offred tells us that the Commander asked her to kiss him.

This is a crucial passage for understanding the role of memory in the novel. Offred links memory and forgiveness. When you can't remember the horrible specifics, you're more likely to forgive—and when you forgive atrocities, you allow others to have power. Perhaps all of her memories of Aunt Lydia aren't brainwashing, but an obsessive desire not *to forget and forgive.*

Offred backs up into an explanatory flashback. Still on the day that Janine gave birth, Offred wakes from her nap when Cora brings dinner. Cora is happy about the healthy baby and hopeful that Offred will have one too. Offred wishes that Cora were disapproving instead.

Offred both longs for connection and longs to be put in her place. She's worried about disappointing others, but she was afraid to take the doctor's offer.

At nine pm, Offred goes to meet the Commander in his office, as Nick previously instructed her. Offred is powerfully aware of the illegality of this action, and how Serena Joy would punish her. Still, Offred knows that she now has some amount of power over the Commander.

Offred is more willing to rebel when someone instructs her to do so—she's risk averse. The Commander can't turn her in without implicating himself.

The Commander's study is filled with books. The Commander has posed himself impressively in front of the fireplace. When he says hello to Offred, she feels she might cry. The Commander is friendly and sits across from her, showing that he's not going to take physical advantage of her. The Commander finally says that he wants to play Scrabble with Offred.

The Commander's posing is a reminder of pre-Gilead masculinity and courtship. In a funny twist, the Commander rebels not by taking advantage of Offred, but by being more gentlemanly and friendly than Gilead would allow. It appears that nearly all the people in Gilead, even those in power, wish for a degree of human connection that Gilead's rules won't allow.

Offred finds this hysterical, but she keeps herself expressionless. She understands that this once innocent game is now illegal, as risky as a drug. And she knows that the Commander can't play with Serena Joy. They play two games—she wins the first, then lets him win. Offred loves the feeling of freedom and of using the letters, which she imagines as tasting delicious.

Offred's fusing of two wonderful things, reading and delicious candy, is a positive version of her previous, more tragic fusing of Nick and Luke or tulips and blood. She categorizes the world based on highly personal emotion.

At the end, the Commander thanks Offred and asks her to kiss him. Offred considers following Moira's lead and making a weapon out of the toilet mechanism and killing the Commander next time. Then Offred confesses that she only pictured such violence afterwards, during her reconstruction. At the time, she gives the Commander a close-mouthed kiss, and he asks for one that seems more meaningful, and looks sad. But then Offred says again that this is just a reconstruction.

Why does Offred want to tell the story in a way that suggests she's more violent and the Commander's more emotional than they really are? Maybe because she's ashamed of her obedience. Maybe because she doesn't want to think that the kiss meant nothing. The passage shows how Offred creates the experience she wants later, through memory.

CHAPTER 24

Offred goes back to bed, trying to get some perspective. We learn for the first time some basic facts about her: she's thirty-three, five foot seven, and brown-haired. Offred realizes she now has the power to ask the Commander for some things. She remembers Aunt Lydia suggesting, but never saying outright, that "men are sex machines" and the Handmaids should learn to steer them. Offred finds the whole situation with the Commander funny, though she knows it could change her life's course, for better or for worse.

Though Gilead oppresses women, this memory of Aunt Lydia suggests that the women don't respect men. Aunt Lydia indicates that the men are unintellectual, more like animals ruled by crude desires. Offred's recent encounter with the Commander seems to contradict this attitude, though she doesn't understand the motive of his actions.

Offred remembers a documentary about World War II that she saw as a child. Her mother tried to explain that it was all true, but Offred was too young and still thought it was "only a story." Offred particularly remembers the mistress of a Nazi concentration-camp supervisor, who said she didn't know about the mass extermination taking place just next to her house. The elderly, dying mistress, wearing a lot of makeup, said in the interview that her lover was not a monster. Offred imagines in detail how sweet and normal the Nazi's behaviors might have seemed. Right after the interview for the documentary, the mistress killed herself. Offred mainly remembers the makeup.

Offred's strong memory of the makeup nods to the importance she attaches to self-preservation and putting on a good appearance. (It also recalls Offred's use of the butter in Chapter 17.) Offred is aligned with the Nazi's wife—she's seeing the human side of a powerful and probably evil man. The anecdote may serve as a warning to Offred not to believe too many nice things about the Commander, even as she tells herself stories that make him seem more caring.

All of a sudden, Offred starts laughing uncontrollably. She desperately tries to be quiet, hiding herself in the closet, her laughter erupting violently like red lava. In the closet she thinks about "Nolite te bastardes carborandorum" and listens to her own heartbeat.

Though earlier Offred thought of her body as betraying her by not getting pregnant (Chapter 13) or hated her body for determining her (Chapter 12), now she finds steadiness in it.

CHAPTER 25

Offred wakes suddenly when Cora drops the breakfast tray. She'd fallen asleep in the closet, which greatly alarms Cora for some reason. Offred lies and says she must have fainted in the closet, which makes Cora excited about it being an early sign of pregnancy. Offred and Cora decide that it's less suspicious just to lie that Cora dropped the tray on her way out. Offred is pleased that Cora is willing to deal with Rita's displeasure on her behalf.

Though Cora's concern and slight rule-breaking may seem like exceptional kindness, her interest above all in Offred's fertility situation suggests that she's just another of the many in Gilead who care about Offred only for her body and what it can do.

The narrative jumps forward. All the previous action took place in May, and now it's summertime, and the tulips are gone. Returning from a grocery trip, Offred sees Serena Joy cutting off the tulips' seed pods, destroying the fruit to make next year's flowers better. Offred wishes she had the shears.

Serena is the destroyer of the plants' fertility, making them useless to pass on genes, so they will be more beautiful. Since Offred and the tulips are symbolically linked via color, it's almost as though Serena Joy is attacking Offred. Serena's actions also symbolically describe her own role: to be beautiful for her husband, but not to bear a baby.

Offred thinks more about the garden, the irises and bleeding hearts that seem so feminine and dramatic that she finds them "subversive." The flowers manage to break through the earth and make themselves known, and the whole atmosphere is romantic and luxurious. Offred continues to enjoy tempting the checkpoint guards, and wishes for winter to keep her in check.

Despite Serena Joy's violent attempts to control the flowers, Offred sees how the natural world of the garden is at odds with Gilead's rigidity. An innocent hobby to occupy the Wives may be unexpectedly rebellious.

Offred and the Commander continue to meet in secret, when Nick signals, either by polishing the car when Offred walks by, or wearing his hat incorrectly. Offred finds it difficult to sneak around Serena Joy, and sometimes can't make the appointments. Sometimes Serena Joy goes out at night to visit sick Wives. For the Wives, being sick is fun, but sick Handmaids and Marthas mysteriously disappear.

Offred's predicament illustrates how Gilead hasn't created a "women's culture," as Offred imagines in Chapter 21. Instead, Gilead manages to divide women through hierarchy and jealousy. Offred and Serena Joy hate each other, not the system that forced them into these roles.

At first Offred found the Commander's requests funny and anticlimactic, compared to the sexual perversions she'd expected. At their second meeting, they played more Scrabble and Offred realized that he'd let her win at the last meeting. Then the Commander gave Offred a Vogue magazine to read. Before Gilead, Offred hadn't cared much for these magazines, but now she desperately wanted to read it.

It's fitting that the first thing the Commander gives Offred to read is a fashion magazine, a manual on a type of femininity that no longer exists, that Gilead and the Commander himself as a leader of Gilead eliminated. Vogue exemplifies both the freedoms and the stresses on pre-Gilead women. It is important to note that pre-Gilead women also had ideals to conform to—ideals communicated by Vogue and culture, though not enforced by the government.

At first, Offred turned down the Vogue, but the Commander said that she was allowed to read it. Offred notes the almost masculine confidence of the supermodels, and their makeup. Though Aunt Lydia would find this evil, Offred just finds it "naughty."

The word "naughty" connotes something playful, flirty and childlike. Though the consequences of this rebellion could be serious, here we see Offred taking Gilead's rules lightly.

Offred asked why the Commander had saved a magazine that should have been burned, and the Commander said that certain people could keep what the masses shouldn't. After he sadly said that he didn't have anyone else to show it to, Offred boldly suggested that he could have shown it to Serena Joy. The Commander explained that he and his wife didn't communicate, and Offred understood why the Commander wanted to see her instead.

The Commander's belief that some people could break Gilead's rules shows that he also takes the government lightly—even though he played a role in creating it. He may be elitist, but he also understands the importance of having some freedoms. He's certainly hypocritical, but honest about his issues.

At their third meeting, Offred requested lotion. The Commander laughed at the fact that she'd been using butter, and she felt angry. He gave her the lotion four days later, and she explained that she couldn't keep it in her room. The Commander hadn't even realized the degree to which the Handmaids were spied on, and Offred became angry explaining it to him. But he told her she could keep the lotion in his office.

Strangely, the Commander wasn't even aware of Offred's treatment. This suggests that the lack of empathy between characters may not be because of personal hatreds, but because the structure of Gilead is so opaque that no one knows each other's experiences.

CHAPTER 26

Offred found the next Ceremony awkward in a new way. Before, she and probably the Commander too both managed to drift absent-mindedly through it, but now Offred felt, for the first time, self-conscious and shy about her body. Offred's feelings towards Serena Joy changed too, moving from pure hatred to jealousy and even guilt. Offred enjoyed her small power over Serena Joy, but knew that if Serena Joy found out, or if the Commander were slightly careless, she would be horribly punished. At one point during the Ceremony the Commander seemed to want to touch Offred's face, and later she warned him to be careful, teasing him a little.

The Commander isn't the first man for whom Offred has been a mistress. Luke was also married when they began their relationship, and that time, Offred did it for love, not because she had to follow the whims of her superior. Perhaps now Offred doesn't need to feel guilty, since she must do what the Commander wants. Or perhaps Offred is in the wrong, selfishly focusing on her own love and life. It is interesting though how Gilead would describe Offred's relationship with Luke as a sin punishable by death but officially sanctions and creates her current almost identical "mistress" situation. Gilead's issue seems not to be with a woman serving as a mistress, but a woman having the choice to act in a way she pleases.

Offred remembers Aunt Lydia talking about future generations, when the population will rebound and there will be enough Handmaids to stay in each household and live like a family. Aunt Lydia says that it's freer when women work together to run the home, and that in the future each Handmaid might have her own garden.

Aunt Lydia again proves her prowess at presenting Gilead as an improvement over the former world. Her words show how she presents Gilead as a "women's culture," as Offred imagines in Chapter 21.

Offred feels that she's become a traditional-type mistress to the Commander. She thinks that maybe Serena Joy even knows about it and lets it happen to take away some of the burden of being the wife. Offred is happier than before, now that she's interested in the Commander and that he sees her as a person.

Offred never goes so far as saying she loves the Commander, but this passage shows how much she cares about relationships. She even tries to justify away her guilt about Serena Joy.

CHAPTER 27

Offred and Ofglen go shopping on a hot summer day. They pass the fish store, and Offred thinks that most fish might be extinct. Offred remembers how, before Gilead, there was an ice cream store on the street where she used to bring her daughter.

Unlike the flourishing gardens, the fish population seems to have suffered from environmental problems, just like the humans. The past is present everywhere to Offred.

Offred and Ofglen have become more familiar, and Ofglen is slightly more outgoing. The Wall is empty of bodies, but still frightening for its potential. When there are bodies Offred checks to make sure none of them could be Luke. Offred thinks about the university campus, now belonging to the Eyes. She imagines the murals of Victory and Death inside of the main library.

It's symbolically rich that the anti-intellectual Gilead has taken over Harvard's campus. But the murals that Offred describes really do exist in Widener Library at Harvard, highlighting that Gilead and the real world are both violent and nationalistic.

The two Handmaids pass a chain store called Soul Scrolls. Customers, including Serena Joy, can remotely order one of five prayers, which the machines pronounce aloud and print onto paper, in an entirely automated process. In the window glass, Ofglen makes eye contact with Offred. Ofglen wonders in a whisper to Offred if God cares about the prayers, a dangerous and rebellious question. Offred says no, allying herself with Ofglen's blasphemy.

The Soul Scrolls concept shows how far the seemingly God-based theocracy has deviated from meaningful religion. Praying is impersonal, mechanical and transactional—yet the medieval Catholic Church also encouraged its constituents to get "indulgences" with cash.

Offred and Ofglen continue to talk. Ofglen seems knowledgeable about where and how it's safe to talk. Both Handmaids admit that they thought the other was a true believer. Offred is very happy to learn that Ofglen's a rebel. Then Ofglen offers Offred a chance to "join us," and Offred learns for the first time that there's a secret, organized Resistance. Offred briefly worries that Ofglen is a spy, but allows herself to hope. Soon they have to stop talking because of the crowds.

Before this scene, we'd only seen signs of individual rebellions, such as Moira's escape, or Offred's flight with her family. The organized Resistance shows that Gilead doesn't have mind control over everyone as well as it seems to over Offred. Some people are willing to risk more to achieve more.

Offred and Ofglen fearfully watch the approach of a black van with the winged eye symbol painted on it. Two Eyes come out, grab a man on the street, somehow knock him out, and put him in the van. Offred is glad that they didn't come for her.

This scene both reinforces Gilead's danger and control, and shows Offred's lack of empathy towards other rebels. She cares most about saving herself.

CHAPTER 28

Offred sits at the window of her room, still excited about her encounter with Ofglen. She's been given an electric fan, and she imagines that Moira would know how to make it into a weapon. Moira would probably dislike Offred's deal with the Commander, since she thought Offred was wrong to take Luke from another woman. On the other hand, Moira liked women and didn't mind stealing them.

This complex and important passage illustrates how everyone in the story is hypocritical, with no one fully good or evil. Though Offred's actions with Luke or the Commander may not be morally correct, desire for human connection and love (at any cost) is universal.

Offred delves into a specific memory of talking to Moira in Offred's kitchen. Offred worked at an insurance company and lived in a run-down house. She told Moira that she couldn't create a perfect life just by ignoring men. Moira disagreed, and the friends laughed that they sounded like Offred's mother.

In this passage, too, it's unclear who's right and who's wrong. We might fault Offred for being uninvolved in the struggle for women's rights, but Moira's radicalism hardly seems like the solution.

Later, Offred moved to a better apartment for two years until Luke got his divorce. She worked digitizing a library, sometimes saving the books that were destined to be shredded. Back in the current time, Offred ponders the strange fact that millions of women used to have jobs. She thinks about the old dollar bills, no longer in existence.

Offred spent two years of her life waiting for Luke, showing both the passion and patience of her great love for him, and also her willingness to let his needs dictate hers. She let men control her even when it was for love, even when it was her choice. The passage echoes Offred's struggles with waiting in Chapter 13.

Offred thinks that the lack of paper money made it easier for the Gilead authorities to take power. After an unnamed "catastrophe," the Gilead leaders killed the president and Congress, and "Islamic fanatics" got the blame. The army, in a state of emergency, said that it had to temporarily stop using the Constitution. Offred was shocked at the sudden collapse of the government, but Moira understood that there were deeper goals than chaos.

Finally, more than halfway through the novel, Offred reveals the origins of Gilead. The Gileadean leaders scapegoated one religion while planning to impose their own type of fanaticism, disguising their extremism as something familiar.

The Gilead authorities began to make changes in the name of security, such as shuttering newspapers, adding roadblocks, and closing down "Pornomarts" and "Feels on Wheels vans." Generally people accepted these measures, feeling safe. But one September day, when Offred and Luke had been married for years and their daughter was three or four, Offred found that her money card for her Compucount didn't work anymore, despite her thousands in the bank.

Gilead's inoffensive, conservative shutdowns of the porn industry seem like something that Offred's mother and her feminist friends would agree to. Yet even these modest, agreeable shutdowns represent a loss of freedom. The text suggests that it's better to have freedom and ugliness than neither.

Later that day, Offred's boss at the library, seeming unbalanced and distracted, fired her and all the other female employees, saying the law required him to. In the hall outside were two men with machine guns. The women were confused but didn't rally or try to fight back. Offred thought that she and the others even felt ashamed.

This passage raises questions of self-preservation and blame. The boss acted just like Offred does now, following the rules to save his life. But Gilead succeeded because of the selfishness and cowardice of human nature.

Offred returned home, restless and nervous. She managed to reach Moira, who had been working for a women's publishing company. Moira came over, and explained that every woman's bank account had been suspended, and their money transferred to male family members. Moira seemed happy and determined. Moira understood that, if the new government hadn't made it impossible, all the women would be trying to leave the country.

Though Moira, at first, seems excited to resist Gilead, we see in her escape from the Rachel and Leah Center a similar form of selfishness. Unlike Ofglen, she doesn't take part in an organized Resistance—even though, before Gilead, she was an activist for women's rights. She just tries to save herself.

Offred picked up her daughter, and Luke came home. He tried to comfort Offred by saying that the measures were temporary and "it's only a job," but Offred felt he didn't understand, and he was even being patronizing. She pointed out that he got all her money. When she described the scene of her firing to him, she realized that the army men with machine guns didn't belong to the US Army.

As usual, Luke comes off as both loving and slightly too carefree. On the other hand, Offred didn't mind when he argued about feminism with her mother (Chapter 20). Offred, like Luke, cares most about causes when they affect her personally.

There were only small protest marches, quickly controlled by the army shooting all the protesters. There were also some bombings, but maybe the army set them off too. Luke encouraged Offred not to go protest, and she didn't, and became a stay-at-home housewife. Offred and others were afraid to say anything that might get them reported.

Though Gilead uses many subtler techniques to implement its government, clearly the most effective one is violence. But violence isn't very convincing. There may be fewer true believers than Offred thinks.

Offred goes into a further-back memory, from when she was a teenager. She remembered her mother coming back from a march perhaps about abortions, with noisy, combative female friends whom Offred found annoying. Offred used to wish her mother would be less brazen. But now Offred misses her.

Offred's opinion of this memory is unclear. Does she scorn the feminists for not being more combative when Gilead appeared? Or does she sympathize with them?

Back in the present time, Offred watches Nick go out into the garden, and admires his body. She sees his hat is askew, which means Offred will see the Commander tonight. Offred wonders what Nick thinks of her trysts with the Commander, and if he imagines that Offred and the Commander are having depraved sex.

Though Offred often lacks empathy for others, she eagerly imagines herself into Nick's mind here. She evidently has a crush—and love, in whatever form, takes Offred out of her selfishness.

Offred remembers back to the day she lost her job, when Luke wanted to have sex and she didn't. Offred felt that the balance of power had shifted, that he still had everything that she had lost, that she was his possession, and that he might even like the way that events had turned. But she never asked him. From her faraway position, she asks Luke if she was right.

Though Offred sees losing her job as the turning point, we might suspect that the balance of power had never been equal, given that she was Luke's mistress, and she had to wait around for him. Gilead merely made her more aware of this implicit inequality.

CHAPTER 29

Offred plays Scrabble in the Commander's office, at ease in her chair, perfecting the scene by imagining a fire in the fireplace. She finds the Commander father-like, and maybe even friendlier than Luke. Still, she wonders the goal of his kindness. He allows her to read magazines and even books by Charles Dickens or Raymond Chandler. But tonight she wants to talk to him about himself. He says he used to be a market researcher and is now some kind of scientist. Offred daringly asks him what "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum" means, and writes it for him.

When Offred talks about the Commander, she is particularly upfront about her storytelling impulse to improve and embellish. This indicates both an improved sense of creativity (maybe stemming from the books she's finally allowed to read) and a sense of disappointment or shame that she wants to disguise from her readers.

The Commander says it's only joke Latin, from his schoolboy days. He shows Offred an old textbook with different Latin jokes, and explains that the phrase means "Don't let the bastards grind you down." Offred understands that the previous Handmaid must have learned the phrase from the Commander.

The origins of the rebellious-seeming phrase are a disappointment. The previous Handmaid isn't so mysterious, and Offred's relationship with the Commander isn't so special. And yet it indicates that the Commander has long felt the need to break the rules of government he helped build in order to share human connection.

Offred simply asks what became of "her," and the Commander knows what she's asking. He says that the previous Handmaid hanged herself, which is why they plastered over the place where there used to be a hanging light. Cora found her, and so Offred understands Cora's overreaction when Offred fell asleep in the closet.

Offred and the previous Handmaid seem to have a lot in common. Both wanted some connection to each other (achieved via writing), and both considered suicide—though, for once, Offred's passivity on this matter is reassuring.

Offred realizes that the Commander has been spending time with her to raise her spirits, so she won't do the same as the previous Handmaid. Offred says that maybe she shouldn't come to his office anymore. She realizes that his own guilt is motivating this kindness. To discourage her leaving, he asks what she wants, and she says she wants to know what's happening.

Offred has been concerned since the beginning about the Commander's motives, but she seems disappointed to learn that they're more about his feelings than a specific desire for her. Yet Offred's love for others (such as her mother at the end of Chapter 28) also takes this form.

CHAPTER 30

Offred sits by the window at night. She sees Nick in the garden, and he sees her in the window, a romantic moment they can't consummate. Offred knows that Nick and Luke can't be substituted for one another, and remembers Moira's claim that people can't control their feelings but can control their behavior.

Nick presents a new set of emotions for Offred. Instead of being a mistress, now she's the one cheating, on Luke's memory. Now that she's in the active position, she's more concerned about morality.

Offred remembers the night before her escape attempt with Luke and their daughter. They couldn't pack much, which would be suspicious. Luke realized that they couldn't take their cat or give her away, so he took her to the garage and killed her. In retrospect, Offred knows the cat died for nothing. She wonders who informed the authorities about their leaving, possibly a neighbor or the passport forger. Offred can't clearly remember her family's faces.

Luke's willingness to commit violence, even to help his family, subtly suggests that he might fit in well as part of Gilead. Though at other times Offred is happy to offer "reconstructions," such as in Chapter 23, she doesn't want to make up her family's faces. In her most emotional moments, she prefers accuracy to invention.

Offred remembers saying bedtime prayers at the Rachel and Leah Center, when Aunt Lydia would adjust the Handmaids with a wooden stick so that they looked perfect. The Handmaids prayed to be empty, so that they could be filled with fertility, and Janine would sometimes get annoyingly excited.

Aunt Lydia's attentiveness to the superficial, visual quality of prayer echoes the Soul Scrolls of Chapter 27. Gilead uses the structure and rituals of religion, with none of the actual content. Religion becomes a means to power in general and over women, rather than an end in itself.

In the current time, Offred prays out the window. She acknowledges that God probably didn't want all this, and hopes He prevents her family from suffering too much. Offred thinks about how she could still hang herself on one of the closet hooks. She imagines that God might be frustrated with the current situation. She wishes God would respond, and she feels very alone.

In contrast to the previous passage, Offred offers a legitimate, heartfelt prayer, acknowledging the emptiness of the theocracy. In contrast to her selfish tendencies, she prays for her loved ones, not for pregnancy or some other personal cause.

CHAPTER 31

It's a very hot July, and Offred feels listless and stiff, like an old woman. She wishes she could have a petty argument with Luke about some household chore, and passes time fantasizing about that. Today the chandelier's old spot looks like "a frozen halo" or a ripple.

Offred's fantasy about Luke shows how (as in the plastic bag memory scene in Chapter 5) the boring, everyday facts of pre-Gilead life have become rare and therefore desirable.

Offred and Ofglen go shopping. There are two dead bodies on the Wall, killed for belonging to the wrong religions. Many Jewish people, renamed Sons of Jacob by Gilead, were able to immigrate to Israel, but those who stayed and didn't convert were being found and killed. The two Handmaids walk past Harvard's Memorial Hall, which was once a student dining hall where, Moira once told Offred, women weren't allowed to eat.

Harvard's formerly single-sex education system illustrates how the world of Gilead and the real world aren't so far apart. The sexism in the novel, even the law that women aren't allowed to read, is unfortunately common in world history.

Ofglen says the Eyes now eat at the hall. She tells Offred about the Resistance movement's password, "Mayday," which Ofglen had once tried saying to Offred. The password reminds Offred of spy novels. The Handmaids return home, and Nick's crooked hat signals to Offred that she'll have a nighttime meeting with the Commander.

Offred now knows two secret methods of communication about rebellion: Mayday, and Nick's hat. Little by little, Offred strays from her formerly law-abiding, fearful ways.

Serena Joy sits knitting in the garden, and calls to Offred as she walks by. Serena Joy asks Offred to hold her wool, explaining that Offred needs air, because her room is "too damn close." The curse surprises Offred. Offred respects Serena Joy's determination to knit, despite her arthritic hands. Offred's mother didn't knit, but she made chains of safety pins from the cleaners'.

For the first time, Serena Joy seems motherly and even worthy of admiration. Offred's amusing flashback to her mother's fiddling with safety pins recalls Offred's wish for a more conventional mother. For a moment, it's Serena Joy.

Serena Joy tells Offred that she's running out of time for a baby, and then daringly suggests that perhaps the Commander "can't." The women make eye contact, and Serena Joy suggests that Offred try with another man. Offred points out the illegality of such an action. Serena Joy continues, saying that Ofwarren (Janine) got pregnant by a doctor, and Warren's Wife knew. Serena Joy explains she thought Nick might be suitable.

Serena Joy shows that she's a rebel too, and a surprisingly altruistic one. Certainly she's motivated by her own desire for a baby, but her actions might save Offred's life. Even her idea of pairing Offred with attractive, friendly Nick is strangely selfless.

Offred asks about the Commander, and Serena Joy says it'll be a secret. Offred says it's risky, but agrees quickly. Serena Joy encourages Offred by offering to obtain a picture of Offred's daughter. Offred is powerfully angry and hopeful at once. Finally, after cursing about the weather, Serena Joy gives Offred a cigarette and tells her to get a match from Rita.

Serena Joy's desire to do even more for Offred, and to pull strings to convince her, shows how Serena Joy must consider Offred truly obedient to Gilead. To us, Offred seems to be an eager rebel, but she's hidden that well.

CHAPTER 32

Offred gives Rita the groceries and asks for a match. Rita is annoyed, but won't disobey Serena Joy's instructions. Then Rita eats one of the ice cubes on the table, and offers one to Offred in an unexpectedly friendly gesture. Offred can't wait to smoke her cigarette, but she realizes she could also save the match, and burn down the house someday.

All of a sudden, the women who normally neglect Offred are changing their tunes. Unfortunately, this means that Ofglen's newfound friendship may diminish in importance to Offred. Why rebel when everyone's so nice?

Offred flashes back to the previous night. The Commander drinks in front of her and then makes up words in Scrabble, or sits below her like a child. Ofglen told Offred that he's very high-ranking. Last night, the Commander explained to Offred that one of the problems before Gilead was that the men didn't have feelings anymore, because sexual gratification was so easily obtainable, via porn or prostitution. Now, he says, men can feel again.

The Commander's childlike position both references Offred's tragedy and the Commander's innocence (or willful blindness) about Gilead's bad qualities. He may believe that in this new society men can feel again, but his relationship with his wife is failing and the sex is horrible.

The Commander asks for Offred's opinion on what the Gilead has done. Offred says she has no opinion, but lets him know her feelings by asking if he considers Gilead "better." The Commander explains that "you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs"—there will always be pros and cons. Back in the present time, Offred lies in bed, wishing for a thunderstorm, because then she could go be afraid with Rita and Cora. She imagines the former Handmaid hanging from the ceiling, safe from further harm.

The Commander's explanation of Gilead leaves out religion. Religion was just a means to an end. He imagines that Gilead was founded to help men get over their sexual issues—and he believes that's a good reason! The Commander's explanation reveals his own anxieties, but also demonstrates how sexism can come from fear of women's power, not just disdain for their weakness.

CHAPTER 33

Offred and Ofglen walk to the Women's Prayvaganza, and Offred is aware of how pleasantly identical they look. She remembers playing with dandelions with her daughter. The rows of women going through the checkpoint look like overgrown students. The Prayvaganza takes place in a courtyard on the Harvard campus. Ofglen tells Offred to sit with her in the back, so they can talk.

The childlike imagery of the Handmaids, all in uniform like students, is an abrupt reminder of the eggs that had to break to allow the Commander and other men to have feelings again. The new rules don't just make women powerless; they make them all like children.

Ofglen points out that Janine is with a new Wife, because the baby girl turned out to be "a shredder." Ofglen tells Offred that Janine had sex with a doctor for the baby, and now she thinks that she's being punished for her sins. Offred thinks that Janine reacted that way to avoid feeling like her life is meaningless, like she isn't in a story.

As usual, Offred both hates Janine and has unusual, even sympathetic, insight into her situation. Offred realizes that everyone wants to be in a story with a comprehensible plot. Offred's storytelling allows her that artificial feeling.

Offred goes into a flashback from the Rachel and Leah Center. Janine sat on the bed in a trance, whispering greetings like a waitress. Moira slapped her to try to bring her back to the present, telling her that she'd get killed right away for such behavior. Janine began to get dressed, and Moira instructed Offred to make sure Janine stayed in reality, because that behavior was "catching."

Janine's form of rebellion isn't active and considered like Ofglen's, but emotional and reflexive. Offred's behavior is between those two extremes. She wants to be reasonable, but she lacks Moira's independent thinking.

CHAPTER 34

Back in the present day, the Commander in charge of the Prayvaganza enters, and Offred imagines him having sex with his Handmaid. The Commander gives a speech, and then twenty blue-clad mothers give twenty white-veiled daughters in arranged marriage to twenty Angels, who wear black. Offred thinks that soon, none of the daughters will remember the liberties of the time before Gilead, including reading and wearing comfortable clothes.

Offred's musing about how the next generation won't know what life was like outside or before Gilead is thematically linked to the "Historical Notes" at the book's end. People forget the past as easily as they lack empathy for one another, and even storytelling is of limited use to preserve experiences.

Offred flashes back to an evening with the Commander, when he explained that Gilead actually made things better for women. They no longer had to deal with the hardships of finding a husband or fitting a certain beauty standard, and they didn't have to worry about abusive husbands or getting by as single mothers. The Commander then asked Offred what the Gilead authorities left out, and she said love. But the Commander said arranged marriages statistically succeed as well as love-based ones. Offred also remembered Aunt Lydia disdaining love. The Commander asserted that Gilead's way was more traditional and natural.

Offred thinks that lack of love is the most important issue with Gilead. Though the Commander thinks he's defended Gilead by defending arranged marriages (which in the real world as well may be even more successful than the unarranged ones), Gilead's love problems go deeper. Even within the marriages, the paranoia, strict hierarchy, and lack of freedom make love difficult, if not impossible.

Back at the Prayvaganza, Offred thinks about the women usually celebrate weddings, and the men celebrate military victories. But some women's Prayvaganzas sometime happen when young nuns agree to become Handmaids. (Older nuns go to the Colonies.) The young nuns don't seem to renounce their ways easily, since they all bear signs of torture.

The nuns' bravery in the face of torture demonstrates the difference between actual religion (which the novel supports) and the rigidness of theocracy. Despite Catholicism's gender rules, the nuns prove themselves to be as rebellious and brave as Moira.

The Commander in charge of the Prayvaganza reads from the bible about how women must be modest, silent, and kept under men's authority, since Eve lead Adam astray. He reads that women will "be saved by childbearing." The Angels lift off their new brides' veils, to see their faces for the first time. Offred imagines advice to the young brides in dealing with the boring sex to come.

Offred's wry imaginary advice shows the gap between the lofty Biblical passage and the wretched reality of Gilead. The whole Prayvaganza functions as a counterpoint to the Commander's assertion that, in Gilead, men can feel again.

Offred goes into a Rachel and Leah Center flashback. She remembers Aunt Lydia explaining that the women must work together, and then Moira making fun of her words in the bathroom, imagining that Aunt Lydia has made Janine into her sex slave. Offred wanted to laugh, but acted serious, and Moira called her a wimp. Back at the Prayvaganza, Offred realizes that Moira was right that it does good to make fun of the powerful. She imagines the embarrassing, unattractive sex between the Angels and their new wives.

Offred may be wrong to attribute the laughing-at-power idea to Moira—Offred's been making fun of those in power from the beginning of the book. Offred underestimates her own rebellious instincts, even though, as Moira points out, she wimpily tries to hide it.

After the Prayvaganza, Ofglen whispers to Offred that she knows about Offred's secret meetings with the Commander. Ofglen is curious if they're having illicit sex, and Offred doesn't confess what's really happening, since the Scrabble doesn't have "the dignity of coercion." Ofglen tells Offred to use the meetings to learn anything she can, and report back.

Surprisingly, Offred is ashamed of her respectful, almost egalitarian relationship with the Commander, so she gives Ofglen a different impression. She doesn't want to disappoint her rebellious new friend by seeming to be agreeable to the Commander.

CHAPTER 35

Back in her room, Offred goes back into the flashback of her family's failed attempt to cross the Canadian border. They gave their fake passports, which covered up Luke's past divorce, to a border guard, and Luke got out of the car to stretch and watch as Offred prayed. Then Luke got into the car and began to speed away, since he saw the border guard telephoning someone. He stopped by the side of the road, and Luke, Offred and their daughter ran into the woods, desperately trying to evade capture.

Offred has fragmented this story throughout the novel, but this is the missing piece, when she went from believing in her escape from the growing Gilead to knowing it was doomed. Her withholding of this piece for last shows that her loss of hope, even more than the moment they removed her daughter, is the most painful.

Offred breaks off there, and addresses her audience directly, saying that she doesn't want to tell the story, and she could stop fighting and just retreat into herself. She thinks about the futility of the previous Handmaid's Latin slogan. She switches track, getting into another memory.

These thoughts on storytelling contrast with Offred's cynical thoughts about Janine's desire to be in a story (Chapter 33). Before, twisting life into a story was giving up. Now, not telling the story is giving up.

Offred thinks about her conversation with the Commander about love, then muses more generally about falling in love. She thinks that it's hard to remember the feeling of being in love. She remembers being careful and worried about safety at night. She remembers how easy it seemed to be proactive and change things when they weren't good. Now she's stuck in time with Luke. She cries and asks the audience for forgiveness for being so nostalgic.

Though Offred repeatedly mentions how she's not sure if she even has an audience, this passage makes clear how much she cares about her audience's opinion, just like she cares about Ofglen's opinion of her actions with the Commander. The passage also strongly links love and freedom.

Finally someone knocks at Offred's door, but it's Serena Joy with a photo, not Cora with dinner. Offred examines the Polaroid of her daughter, looking tall in a white dress. Offred doesn't see in the photo any signs that her daughter has remembered her, and wishes that she hadn't seen the photo.

Offred's conclusion that her daughter doesn't remember or care about her is also storytelling. A photo can't reveal much, but Offred projects her fears of the worst. As in Chapter 12, she'd rather not hope for her daughter.

CHAPTER 36

At night, Offred goes to see the Commander, who seems already drunk. He says he has a surprise for Offred, then gives her a worn-looking skimpy sequined leotard. Offred remembers seeing TV coverage of the bonfires to destroy such clothing. He tells Offred to put it on as a disguise, so they can go out, and she's excited to do something so rebellious. He gives her some old makeup to apply, and then a blue hooded cloak of Serena Joy's.

Offred is excited to change from her modest robes (that nonetheless reveal her role as a sex worker) to an overtly feminine, sexy outfit. Yet she's more excited about the bold opportunity to rebel than about her opportunity to reclaim her femininity.

Nick drives Offred and the Commander. Offred can't tell what Nick thinks of all this, and imagines the possibilities. The Commander has a pass to get Offred through the checkpoints. Then he makes Offred hide on the car floor to a place where Wives are prohibited. They hurry through a back entrance, and Offred understands that the Commander has been here before. The Commander tells Offred to pretend she's an "evening rental," and Offred wishes she could see how she looked.

Still, as soon as Offred puts on makeup, she becomes more self-conscious, aware of a new ideal. This demonstrates how easily she slips into old habits. Her personality changes as quickly as her clothes. This supports, or at least makes non-ridiculous, the Commander's claim that women are actually freer when they have fewer chances to modify their appearances.

CHAPTER 37

Offred and the Commander enter the courtyard of what used to be a hotel. There are women in a variety of sexy outfits, including pre-Gilead jogging gear, and they all wear makeup. The Commander thinks it looks like the past, but Offred finds that it feels very different. The Commander talks with other men, both showing Offred off to them, and demonstrating his power to her.

The Commander's assertion that the club looks like the past shows his misunderstanding of the pre-Gilead days. For him, the main difference between the two societies is the women's clothes (rather than the women's rights and freedom), illustrating his foolish and dangerous innocence.

The Commander and Offred sit down, and he asks her opinion on "our little club." Offred says she thought this was illegal, but the Commander explains it's necessary because men naturally need different women. The Commander thinks that women used to wear different outfits to give their men that necessary diversity.

The Commander's pseudo-scientific justification of male desire echoes his earlier statements about how porn made men unfeeling. In his view, men are powerless to control their sexuality and therefore must control women in order to control themselves.

The Commander tells Offred that the men are high-ranking officials and foreign businessmen, and the women are some former prostitutes and some well-educated women who chose this life. He flirtily asks Offred if she'd prefer this, and she flirts back. He encourages Offred to have a drink, and kisses her hand.

Given the Commander's views that men have no self-control over their sexuality, which reflects a fear of female power, he must enjoy seeing these high-achieving women debasing themselves for him.

As Offred waits for her drink, she sees Moira across the room, wearing a slutty and disheveled animal costume. She looks bored, scanning the room, and then sees Offred and gestures that they should meet at the bathroom in five minutes. When the Commander returns, Offred heads for the bathroom, unsteady in her heels.

Moira and Offred use their old gestures from the Rachel and Leah Center to communicate again. Moira's presence here seems like a crazy coincidence, but maybe Gilead is smaller than it pretends to be.

CHAPTER 38

An Aunt with a cattle prod tells Offred she has fifteen minutes. Offred enters a ladies' lounge, with has a mirror, unlike at her house. Moira comes out of the bathroom and hugs Offred, with her familiar no-nonsense attitude. Moira has slept with Offred's Commander before, and says Commanders bring Handmaids as a "power trip," though Offred believes he has more complex reasons.

Offred mentally defends the Commander, showing that, despite his foolish opinions, their odd relationship means something to her. Moira, on the other hand, seems hardened to life, callous and closed off to subtlety.

Moira tells Offred her story over two bathroom trips, and Offred tries to tell it to her audience in Moira's voice, adding to the bare-bones version Moira told her. Moira explained that, after tying up Aunt Elizabeth, she left without a real plan, and managed to make it through the checkpoints faking an Aunt-style frown. She made her way to a Quaker household she remembered from her feminist press's mailing list, remarking that she might have given away the names of all the people on the list when she was tortured.

Offred's speaking in Moira's voice, complete with crude expressions, shows how storytelling, for Offred, can also be a form of role-play. As it turns out, Moira's pre-Gilead connections to activists and feminists did prepare her better than most to deal with Gilead, since she located the Resistance through them.

The Quaker couple let Moira in, and gave her clothes, although they were nervous keeping her since they had two little children. They brought her to another Quaker family that was part of the Underground Femaleroad. A post office worker helped Moira move to a new station, and later was executed and displayed on the Wall.

Moira's quest to get out (and her blunt acknowledgment of the helpers who died to help her) contrasts with Ofglen's quest to gather information about Gilead. Moira is not so selfless.

Moira felt guilty that people were risking their lives for her, but her hosts explained that they helped because of their religion. This was before Gilead started gathering up the Christian sects it disagreed with. Moira spent eight or nine months on the Femaleroad and made it to Maine, but for unknown reasons, someone tipped off the authorities and they came for Moira and the couple helping her. Moira remembered how Aunt Lydia enjoyed torturing her. In the Eyes' van, Moira wanted to commit suicide but was unable.

The hosts' determination to help out for religious reasons, like the nuns' bravery in Chapter 34, is another defense of the good that religion can do, when it's not being twisted into a theocracy. The passage suggests that faith can lead to real selflessness and even love. The strangers risked as much for Moira as Luke and Offred did for each other.

They brought Moira to some other place that she doesn't want to talk about. After torture, they showed Moira a video about the Colonies. At some Colonies, women must burn dead bodies. At others, people have to clean up toxic waste or radiation, and since it's cheaper not to feed the workers well or give them proper protection, they all die in around three years. There might be other Colonies that are more like regular farms, but Moira didn't hear about them. The women in the Colonies are either old women, failed Handmaids, or rebels. Men make up a quarter of the population. Everyone (even men) wears gray dresses.

It's fitting that men must wear dresses in the Colonies, which symbolically strip them of their biological superiority. The Colonies have come up throughout the book, sometimes seeming like a not-so-terrible alternative to Handmaid life, but only now are their horrors revealed. They're death camps, echoing the Holocaust.

Moira picked Jezebel's over the Colonies. She'll manage to stay there three or four years before her "snatch wears out," and she can have alcohol and drugs. Here Offred interjects, shocked at Moira's listlessness. She's lost her essential spark and bravery, and Offred feels she's lost a hero. Moira makes a joke about the club being "butch paradise," to make Offred feel better.

In Chapter 34, Offred remembers Moira making fun of Janine for acting like a prostitute. Now, Moira has given in to her position and given up hope. Though opportunities for suicide seem to abound, Moira prefers this purgatory of easy pleasures—she still has her crassness, but she no longer has hope. She has chosen a drab life of being used over rebellion or death.

Offred wishes she could tell her audience a story about Moira managing to escape or blowing up Jezebel's. But Offred doesn't know what became of Moira, since they never saw each other again.

Offred generally avoids these dramatic flash-forwards, preferring flashbacks. This sudden reveal makes the tragedy especially shocking.

CHAPTER 39

The Commander brings Offred up to a hotel room at Jezebel's. Offred uses the bathroom and flashes back to her conversation with Moira. Moira saw Offred's mother in one of the videos about the Colonies, which Moira thinks is a fate worse than death. Offred flashes back further, unable to remember the last time she saw her mother. It would have been a casual encounter at Offred's apartment. When the situation got worse, Offred tried to call her mother, to no response.

Offred's mother always appears in videos at the right time—she also showed up in a feminist protest video in Chapter 20. This seeming coincidence, like re-encountering Moira, may indicate either that Offred's mother was an important enemy, or that Gilead is smaller and weaker than it pretends.

Offred spoke to the superintendent of her mother's apartment, and then Luke drove her over to check the place. They opened up the apartment and found evidence that it had been violently searched. Offred wanted to call the police, but Luke told her not to.

Apparently, Offred's mother was a particular target of Gilead. Offred's naïve desire to call the police shows her willingness to do anything for a loved one.

Offred remembers how, during college, Moira said she thought Offred's mother was "neat" and even "cute." Now Offred imagines her mother cleaning up toxic waste. She wants to believe that her mother will manage to get out, but knows that she won't.

As she did at the end of Chapter 38, Offred falls into a rare moment of hopelessness. She has Ofglen, and soon Nick, to talk to and rebel with, but her old life is vanishing.

Back at the hotel, Offred looks in the mirror at her messy, garish outfit. Tomorrow's the Ceremony, so she must be back by midnight to have her first sex with Nick. She exits the bathroom and joins the Commander on the bed. He touches Offred, but she just asks why he brought her. He says it's because she claimed to want to know. He takes off his shirt, which Offred finds sad. She doesn't respond to him, and sees he's "dismayed and no doubt disappointed." She tries to fake arousal.

Though in previous meetings Offred enjoyed her time with the Commander (and even felt embarrassed to admit to Ofglen that they weren't having sex), now that they do have sex, her positivity is gone. Despite his bad behavior, here the Commander comes off as tragic and pitiable.

CHAPTER 40

Offred lies in her hot bedroom, dressed again in her red robe. The searchlights are off, fortunately or maybe on purpose. Serena Joy comes at midnight and leads her through the house, and gives her instructions on getting to Nick's apartment over the garage. Offred wonders what measures Serena Joy has taken against the night Guardians. Offred knocks on Nick's door and he answers.

This scene demonstrates the differences between Serena Joy's and the Commander's forms of rebellion. The Commander is all about his own immediate gratification and fun, while Serena Joy has longer-term, less selfish goals.

Nick's room is unadorned and military-seeming. He smokes a cigarette and Offred wants to get naked to enjoy the smoke. He turns out the light and takes off Offred's dress, and she is overwhelmed with love and passion.

Offred's immediate arousal contrasts with her dismal time with the Commander at Jezebel's. It all seems too good to be true.

Offred backs up, saying "I made that up." She gives us the real version of events. Nick opened the door and offered her a drag of his cigarette. He looks at her seriously and she feels judged, "stupid and ugly." When she says they should hurry, he says he could just masturbate into a bottle. She tries to be sympathetic to the difficulty, and he says he gets paid. They quote old movies, and Offred starts crying. He comforts her, brings her to the bed and kisses her, telling her "no romance," which means they shouldn't sacrifice themselves for one another. They did the deed and Offred made shameful noises.

And it is too good to be true. As with her meetings with the Commander, Offred feels the need to tell a "better" story (at least a more conventionally romantic one) than the one that occurred. She feels some debt to her audience for listening to all her thoughts. At the same time, Offred is honest about her falsehood, ultimately preferring the embarrassing truth.

Offred says it wasn't like that either, that she can only hope to make a reconstruction and "the way love feels is always approximate." During the sex, she imagined Serena Joy judging her for being easy. Afterward, she felt she'd betrayed Luke by responding so enthusiastically.

Offred's claims about love may seem cynical, but they also indicate that love is such a special experience that she can't even properly feel or express it without resorting to the expected clichés.

CHAPTER 41

Offred wishes her story made her seem better, "more active, less hesitant," and wishes it had more about love and pleasant things. She apologizes for her painful and disjointed story. She hopes others will hear her story, and she will hear others', and she imagines an audience into existence.

As she did in Chapter 23, Offred removes herself from her story to comment on her storytelling. She emphasizes that the story is for others, an act of communication, not just a way for her to pass time.

Offred describes how she started to spend a lot of time with Nick, without Serena Joy's endorsement. She did it for selfish reasons, always thankful to him for receiving her. She sometimes went over just after seeing the Commander. She sketches out a typical Nick encounter. They have sex right away and talk afterward. She wishes she could see him in better light than just the searchlight, and every time they have sex they do it like it's the last time. Offred trusts Nick and tells him everything (except about Luke), though she knows it might be dangerous. Offred doesn't want to know if he got with the previous Handmaid. She feels like she's made Nick into "an idol." He doesn't talk much and seems nonchalant.

When Offred falls in love, nothing else is important. The selfishness that has always been a part of her comes out full force, as does her desire to subject herself to a man's whims, always asking for permission. She even makes Nick a kind of "reconstruction" by idolizing him. At the same time, Offred finally gets to communicate and have freedom. Though she thinks of herself as passive, she's the one knocking on his door.

On shopping trips, Ofglen encourages Offred to find out whatever she can and look through the Commander's papers. But Offred barely pays attention to Ofglen, distracted by thoughts of Nick. Offred tells Ofglen that she's afraid of getting caught, but really she doesn't want to escape anymore. She thinks she might be pregnant, and remembers that Cora seems to think so too, suggesting that Cora might know about the situation. Offred is relieved when Ofglen stops pushing her to help with the Resistance.

Though Offred has never been happier in Gilead, this happiness leads to her most morally reprehensible behavior. Instead of helping Ofglen, and by extension helping more people experience freedom and love, she prioritizes herself. As always in the novel, nothing is purely good or bad.

CHAPTER 42

The Handmaids enter Harvard's campus for a district Salvaging. They walk past Angels in riot gear and enter the quadrangle in front of the main library, where graduations used to take place. Now there's a stage with three nooses. Offred only attended a Women's Salvaging once before, two years ago. Two Handmaids and one Wife are on the stage to be "salvaged." They may be drugged into complacency.

An execution and a college graduation seem to be totally different.in every way. But from another point of view, keeping in mind the "Historical Notes" at the book's end, the novel may be critiquing the self-congratulatory exclusivity and aloofness of academia.

Aunt Lydia comes onto the stage and Offred hates her. She gives a speech about duty, and then announces that she will not be explaining what the women on stage did wrong, so as not to lead to copycat crimes. This upsets the Handmaids, who like to know the kinds of crimes they too could commit. The Handmaids might be there for attempted murder of their Commanders or Wives. And the Wife may be there for attempted murder of a Handmaid, adultery, or escape.

This scene illustrates the extent to which the Handmaids rely on rebellions, like Moira's, to give them ideas to fantasize about. At the same time, Aunt Lydia's explanation that the discussion of crimes might lead to more bad behavior could be encouraging because it shows that Gilead still lacks total control.

The Salvagers prepare to hang Ofcharles, and someone behind Offred, maybe Janine, according to Ofglen, seems to vomit. As the women is hanged, the Handmaids in the audience put their hands on a rope in the grass connected to a noose, to show that they're taking part in the execution.

The Handmaids symbolically hang the women themselves, just as, in Chapter 13, they bond together to scold Janine. Gilead perversely uses peer pressure and herd mentality to create unity among women, but for the purposes of policing and punishing others.

CHAPTER 43

Offred notices how the three hanged women look like dancers in the air. Aunt Lydia tells the Handmaids in the audience to form a circle, acting as though she's giving them a gift. The Handmaids get excited, and Ofglen pulls Offred forward. Offred has a suspicion of what might happen, but can't quite believe it. Aunt Lydia explains the minimalist Particicution rules—the women can do whatever they want after she whistles.

Aunt Lydia's attention to the beauty and presentation of the dead bodies recalls her arranging the Handmaids during prayers (Chapter 30). The beautiful simile of dancers contrasts with the horror, much like how Offred sees the corpses as children's drawings in Chapter 6.

The Guardians drag up a tortured-looking man. Aunt Lydia explains that he's a rapist, and references the bible to say that rapists should be punished by death. She says he raped two Handmaids, one of whom was pregnant and whose baby died. Offred feels overwhelmed with anger. Aunt Lydia blows the whistle, but the Handmaids wait, watching his pathetic gestures, and maybe even a little smile. He begins to say "I didn't," but then the women attack. Ofglen goes first and kicks him in the head.

Surprisingly, the Handmaids seem to preserve a bit of sympathy for the man, up until he tries to deny his actions. Maybe this is because the Handmaids are well acquainted with unwanted sex and men's forceful desires, but not with signs of weakness, like this man was showing.

Offred yells at Ofglen for her actions, and Ofglen whispers to Offred that the man wasn't a rapist, but a member of the Resistance, and she was trying to make him unconscious. Aunt Lydia whistles again, but the frenzy continues. Janine emerges, laughing and saying lines from her waitress job, bloodstained and holding a bit of the man's hair. Offred is angry with Janine for losing her mind, since it means that Janine doesn't have to deal sanely with the horrifying reality. When Offred returns home, she's hungry and wants to have sex.

This encounter with Janine gets to the root of Offred's hatred for her. Offred envies Janine's ability to go crazy, because it means that Janine can float in her own bubble above the situation, instead of engaging with it. However, Offred often retreats into her own memories to cope as well. In Janine, she sees what she fears about herself.

CHAPTER 44

Offred goes shopping. The Ofglen who accompanies her isn't the same one as before. Offred asks what happened to Ofglen, and the new one only says that she is Ofglen. After picking up groceries, Offred suggests a trip to the Wall. She tries to indicate subtly her opposition to the regime, and comes up with a way to mention "Mayday."

The loss of Ofglen shakes Offred out of her usual caution and passivity. Despite her lack of interest in the Resistance before, now she can't wait to make another connection.

The new Ofglen does not respond well and warns Offred off of saying such things. Offred becomes frightened and paranoid. But right when they part in front of her house, the new Ofglen whispers to Offred that the old Ofglen hanged herself when she saw the Eyes' van approaching for her.

Ofglen's death is a brutal reminder of the risks of the Resistance. Though Offred is our protagonist, Ofglen may be the book's hero, truly courageous and willing to sacrifice herself for freedom.

CHAPTER 45

Offred is relieved that the old Ofglen killed herself before torture, which means that Offred's secrets are safe. Still, Offred wonders if the new Ofglen is telling the truth. Walking back indoors, past Nick, Offred begins to panic, praying that she'll be the perfect Handmaid, do anything that's asked of her, so long as she doesn't have to suffer or die. Now she truly understands Gilead's power.

This is Offred's conversion moment—the moment she surrenders to Gilead and gives up hope, just as Moira did. She scorned Janine for her easy surrenders, but now her panicked state resembles Janine's.

Serena Joy comes angrily out of the house, and Offred knows she's in trouble for something, though she doesn't know what. Serena Joy shows her the blue cloak with makeup smeared on it, and the sequined leotard. Serena Joy orders Offred to go upstairs, and calls her a slut like the previous Handmaid. Offred realizes that Nick has stopped whistling.

As at the Particicution or at the Rachel and Leah Center, women are more likely to be punished by fellow women than by men. Rather than bonding together, women take part in Gilead's sexist structure and oppress themselves. Serena Joy was willing to help Offred get pregnant and is willing (grudgingly) to allow Offred to have sex with the Commander for procreative purposes, but she sees Offred as a slut as soon as she learns of Offred's personal connection to the Commander. It is not the sexual relationship that Serena Joy hates, it's the personal relationship. And Gilead has transformed such relationships into criminal and shameful things.

CHAPTER 46

Offred waits in her room, uncertain what her punishment will be. She imagines how she could try to set fire to the house and kill herself that way, or how she could try to climb out the window, or go cry in front of the Commander, or hang herself in the closet. She also imagines kicking Serena Joy in the head, just like Ofglen did at the Particicution. She imagines walking calmly into the street. Finally she imagines going to Nick's room. But she's too tired to do anything. She can feel the ghost of the previous Handmaid encouraging her.

This passage highlights Offred's ability to inhabit several different possibilities at once, though now we see that this capacity may actually prevent her from pursuing any one action. This adds to the interpretation that her imagination actually hinders her independence, instead of helping her cope with Gilead.

Offred stands, maybe planning to do something, and sees that a black van with the winged eye logo has come to the house. Two men come out and ring the doorbell. Offred regrets not having killed herself. Nick enters her room, and she hates him, thinking he might have been an Eye all along. But he tells her that the Eyes accompanying the van are part of Mayday. He urges Offred to trust him.

Though Offred is recounting her story sometime after all of the action, which suggests that she survives her encounter with the Eyes, she never breaks from the moment to reveal the future. Is this, too, a "reconstruction?" Just as Offred must trust Nick, we must trust Offred.

Serena Joy and the Commander look surprised. They didn't call the Eyes. Serena Joy asks what Offred did, and they don't say. The Commander asks for a warrant, and they say they don't need one, for "violation of state secrets." The Commander and Serena Joy turn on Offred, now worried that she might have betrayed them. Rita and Cora come out, and Cora cries. Offred thinks of how much Cora wanted a baby.

The Commander's last-ditch attempt to prevent the Eyes from getting to Offred, and his confused effort to understand what's happening, make him suddenly profoundly sympathetic. For once, the whole household, and the readers, are aligned with the same shocked emotions. And it becomes clear that everyone in Gilead is breaking the theocratic laws; everyone is guilty because the laws are impossible to obey.

The two Eyes help Offred get into the van. She knows she can't do anything else, and so she enters to an uncertain fate.

The cliffhanger ending means that the readers must behave like Offred and imagine the many possibilities that may befall her.

HISTORICAL NOTES ON THE HANDMAID'S TALE

The notes are a transcript of a discussion from "The Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean studies," which takes place in 2195 in Nunavit (modern-day northern Canada). Professor Maryann Crescent Moon introduces the speaker Professor Pieixoto from Cambridge University. She says she thinks Gilead is a worthwhile period to study. She reminds the attendees of upcoming events and talks, and tells Pieixoto to be sure to stay within the time limit so everyone can have lunch. His talk is called "Problems of Authentication in Reference to *The Handmaid's Tale*."

The professors' names suggest that, in the future, formerly marginalized ethnic groups (like the Native Americans, evoked by the last name Crescent Moon) may have more cultural and academic dominance. After the emotional rollercoaster of the novel, Crescent Moon's casual jokeyness comes as a shock.

Professor Pieixoto begins with a joke, then launches into an academic discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale*. He explains that the tale came from a collection of unlabeled cassette tapes found in a locker in Maine. His co-researcher, Professor Wade, titled the story in reference to Chaucer.

Pieixoto also cracks a joke, which is almost offensive, given Offred's suffering. This is a subtle acknowledgment of the difficulty of empathizing with and imagining even the most dramatic history.

After transcription, the professors made sure that the tapes weren't a forgery. Professor Pieixoto emphasizes that the audience should try to understand rather than judge "the Gileadean." His team tried to work out where the story had been recorded, and who else may have been involved, but they found no leads. If the house had been on the Underground Femaleroad, maybe the occupants had been killed.

Pieixoto's emphasis on understanding, not judging, is unclear. Is it Offred whom we're not supposed to judge? Or is it Gilead in general? This is a subtle criticism of academic culture. When we focus on scholarly neutrality towards history, we risk making the same mistakes.

Professor Pieixoto describes other ways that they tried to find more evidence relating to the story. He describes how Offred became a Handmaid because she'd had a relationship with a married man. He talks about the various factors that lead to infertility, from diseases to pollution (and later mentions that a sterility virus was specially created as a weapon). He relates the difficulty of finding anything more about Offred, Luke, Nick, Moira or Janine, as those may have been fake names. He suspects that Offred might have made the tapes within Gilead to help Mayday.

Pieixoto's lecture both illuminates and obscures the story. Much like Offred had to do in Gilead, when imagining, for example, Luke's fate (Chapter 18), Pieixoto must keep several possibilities in mind at once. The additional, purposeful cause for sterility that Pieixoto reveals further highlights the Handmaids' helplessness. The cards were stacked against them.

Professor Pieixoto describes trying to find the Commander. The researchers found a journal that describes two Fredericks. One, Frederick Waterford, used to do market research. He invented the Handmaid's red habits and the name "Particicution." Pieixoto points out that most of Gilead's customs were taken from other societies, not invented.

In interviews, Atwood also emphasizes that all of Gilead's laws were based on real, historical societies. Though the whole book is political, this final section shows how places like Gilead have already existed, and how easy that is to forget.

The other Commander possibility, Frederick Judd, helped with the massacre of the President and Congress and shipping away the Jews (and leaving many of them to drown in the ocean). Judd also came up with the Particicution ceremony itself. Judd conceptualized the Aunt system, understanding that women could control women. Waterford helped with the details.

Like Pieixoto, the readers have the opportunity to judge whether Offred's Commander seems more like Waterford or Judd. While Waterford seems morally corrupt, Judd seems genuinely psychopathic in a way we never saw in the Commander.

Both Judd and Waterford were sterile. Waterford's wife Thelma had worked on television like Serena Joy. Waterford seems to be more likely to be the Commander. The authorities killed him after Offred's departure, for owning banned magazines and books and for hosting a rebel, probably Nick. Nick was probably an Eye as well as a member of the Resistance. Though the Commander would have known that Nick was an Eye, the Commander probably thought he was too high-ranking for his little violations to lead to Nick turning him in.

Waterford's fate brings to mind the Commander's confidence that he was allowed to own banned materials (25). In fact, Gilead was much stricter than he imagined. In the end, the people in charge of Gilead remain anonymous. The Commander is ultimately more aligned with the women of his household, a victim of the system.

Professor Pieixoto wonders what happened to Offred. Maybe she made it to Canada and then England, which was safest. Maybe she was captured. Maybe she cut herself off from society. After Ofglen's death, when it was clear the authorities knew about the local Resistance, Nick could have killed Offred to protect himself, but he got her to escape with the rebel Eyes instead.

The end of Pieixoto's speech may be the book's most important passage about love. From a historical point of view, we can understand how unexpected and irrational Nick's action was. For all his emotionlessness, he saved Offred because of love.

Professor Pieixoto closes with some poetic musings on the past, calling Offred's narrative "in its own way eloquent," and talking about the difficulties of understanding messages from the past.

The book's melancholic ending affirms how easy it is to lack empathy, and how all of Offred's suffering and love (and ours, for that matter) fade into the jumble of human history.

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